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"LOOK AT 'EM! WHITE AND RED AND BLUE! BIG AS HAZEL-NUTS, SOME ON 'EM. 'NOUGH THERE TO BUY A FARM AND A BAKER'S DOZEN O' COWS."

Bob and Sam, THE DAISY DETECTIVES;

OR,

The Gamin Spies' Big Stake.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "WILD DICK'S RACKET," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WHITE AND BLACK PARDS.

It was a pleasant day in late April. The scene was in one of the public squares of the city of Philadelphia. The time was late afternoon.

Dozens of people were hurrying to and fro, few stopping long enough for a glance at the green lawn. Dozens of younger folks were enjoying themselves in childish games.

And over all the sun poured its bright rays, giving beauty and gladness to all that it touched.

But of all the people who enjoyed this breathing space in the heart of the crowded city there are only two with whom we are specially concerned.

And those two cannot be classed with the proud, well-dressed, aristocratic portion of the community, but were decidedly representatives of the humbler class.

One of them was a rollicking-faced boy of uncertain age, that might have been anything from sixteen to nineteen. He was one with whom fortune had not dealt very kindly, for he was dressed in torn and ragged clothes, that seemed like the cast-off garb of some much older personage.

Yet little appeared Bob Butterworth to care for the freaks of fortune. His eyes shone as brightly, and he whistled as jolly an air as if his pockets were jingling with gold, instead of being as empty as a miser's conscience.

His freckled face and turn-up nose, and the defiant way in which he thrust his hands into his pockets, gave him the air of one of the genuine lords of the street, a true Arab of the cobble-stones, as independent as the rovers of the desert.

So he was known as "Bully Bob" by the boys who were forced to respect his prowess and readiness to fight for what he believed was right; but to those who had claimed his comradeship and intimacy he was dubbed Bob Buttermilk—in deference to his name.

He was looking along one of the graveled paths of the square, with an amused face, as if he saw something comical.

"Jolly for us!" he cried, striking his hand on his knee; "if here don't come that black-an'-tan Sam Charcoal! Ain't see'd that gay little nig fer a good month. Wonder where he's been cavortin'!"

The boy on whom his eyes were fixed was a comical little ducky, as black as midnight, with a nose that seemed to spread all over his face, and lips like two chunks of fat ham, while his eyes were like black diamonds.

His woolly hair was curled in funny little kinks all over his round head, and altogether the boy looked the full-blooded African. He was dressed in a smart livery, that gave him a great advantage in appearance over the ragged boy who was coolly observing him.

It was Sam Charcoal, the Premium Darky, as he was known to Bob and his street chums and with whom the son of Africa was a prime favorite.

He came on with a grin that showed his ivory teeth, and a queer roll of his milk-white eyes, as he recognized the Arab who was waiting for him.

"Golly fur all, ef dar ain't dat Bob Buttermilk!" he cried. "Jiss de chap I was gwine to 'look arter'."

"Hello, Charcoal," cried the 'Bully Boy.' "Wharabouts are you subsidin' now? Ain't see'd you since I set the dorg on you way last year."

"Ain't forgotted dat dere time," answered Sam, drawing down his black brows. "Goin' to git eben wid you for't, suah's you lib! Dat dar dorg tuk a squar' yard outen my breeches."

"Oh, but didn't you run and howl! I won't never forgit it," cried Bob, with a shout of laughter. "But that's old pranks, Coal. Ain't goin' to carry that in yer craw forever?"

"S'pose a darky ain't got no memory, nor no feelin's?" demanded Coal indignantly. "Ef you t'inks I'm goin' ter hab dorgs sot on me fur nuffin', den ye're up de wrong tree, dat's all, ef you is Bully Bob wid de boys."

"But it was only a little rat-tarrier," laughed Bob. "Oh, come; let that slide. Where you livin' now? I'm blessed if you ain't as smart as a toad in a green skin."

He twirled the darky around as if he had been a lay figure. Coal broke loose from him, and took a seat on a round-topped bench, with an odd look of mystery on his ebony face.

"Dat's de t'ing I want to talk to yer 'bout," he acknowledged. "Squat yerself down, Buttermilk. Dar's sumfin' I's got to tell yer. S'pose ye kin keep a secret? 'Ca'se if yer can't I'll not say one bressed word. It am de mose ridik'lus t'ing as was eber heerd tell on. But dey'll snip off Charcoal's head suah, if 'tain't kep' mum."

"Me keep a secret?" cried Bob, as he seated himself near the darky. "I'd like ter see a log o' wood as could hold its tongue better. Why ther' ain't a boy on the street as won't tell you I'm as quiet as a brass knocker?"

"Dar's de berry ole debbil afloat," declared Sam in a mysterious tone. "Seems ter me I's got de luck o' hirin' out to rascals. I'm libin' wid two o' de gayest sports in dis yere town. De're coons now, you bet. An— You won't blab Bob?"

"Not if they put my head in pickle, and build a fire under my toes," declared the Arab, solemnly. "I'm awful death on rascals, you know that, Coal."

"Well, den," whispered Coal, "dere's sumfin' crooked, suah! I've heerd dem confabulatin'. An' it's sumfin' 'bout my ole miss' dat was a pretty little gal when I was on'y a pickaninny on de ole plantation. It's Missy Clare de're arter. You know who she am, Bob?"

"You bet I do!" rejoined Bob with energy. "Many a good dinner she's giveme. More than I deserved, I reckon."

"S'pose den you won't mind puttin' ter help her? Ka'se dem sports is got sum ugly game up, I knows dat."

"Spit it out, Sambo! I'm yer hoss, fur a thousand o' brick," cried Bob with great energy. "Miss Clara! Why, I'd stand on my head six hours at a stretch fur her. Goin' fur her, are they? Got their traps laid? See here, Coal, if that's the game I guesses as how you an' I kin spoil it."

"Dat's de talk!" exclaimed Coal, showing the whites of his eyes with satisfaction. "It's too big a job fur one little darky. Want you to go pards with me; dat's what's de matter."

"Guv us yer hand. I'm Bully Bob on that!" and the gamin seized Coal by the hand, and shook it with an energy that made the blacky squirm.

"Now, tell me all about it," demanded Bob. "I never go it blind in none o' my jobs. What's afloat? Let it out right from the shoulder. I've got my listenin' cap on."

Coal looked around him suspiciously. People were every minute passing, many of whom fixed their eyes curiously on the strange pair. Two persons had stopped to talk not far off.

"It am kinder too publicky yere," hinted Coal. "Guess we'd best git ober in dat corner. 'Feard der mought be spies round."

"All right, Smoky; sail out!"

A few minutes found them in an out-of-the-way corner where they were out of hearing of suspicious ears. Here they found seats, and resumed their discourse.

"Missy Clare's got money. Plenty on it. Gobs on it! You know dat, Bob?"

"Oh, yes. Why I've heerd her called the pretty millionairess. And I know she's just as good-hearted as she is rich. I allers toddle round there when I'm short on snacks."

"An' dere's folks arter her money."

"Spect so. Jist like some folks."

"Dar was Mr. Hunter, as I used ter lib wid. He tried to go frew her fortune, but I guess Charcoal spilt his game." Sam grinned with satisfaction. "What's up now? Why, she's got a lubber, in course!"

"Well, that isn't strange, is it?"

"But dat ain't de wuss on it."

"What is the worst, then?"

"It's de gents as I'm libin' wid—Mass' Allen and Mass' Slowby. De're reg'lar swells, Bob. De're s'ciety sports. You better b'lieb dey cut a dash! An' de wuss am, dat de're worked in wid Missy Clare, an', sho's yer born, I heerd 'em lay-in' dere plans to go fur her in an awful way; an' dat's w'at's de matter!"

"Sure of that?" demanded Bob, with great interest.

"Suah! Better b'lieb I'm suah! Dis chile neber says nuffin' fore he's suah. Dey's villains, dey is!"

"What's the ugly dogs arter?" queried Bob, shutting his fists angrily. "I'll be certain death

on any coon that tries to play it on Miss Clara. Spit it out, Coal. I'm your backer."

Coal shook his woolly head doubtfully.

"Dat's jiss what I can't," he remarked in a spiteful tone. "Dey stop talkin' fore dey come to de p'int. All I knows is dis: Dar's Missy Clare, dat's as innercent as a chile, an' b'lieb everybody's made o' goold dust. An' dar's dat lubber o' hern, as I'm feard is a sharp, too. An' yere's Mass' Allen an' Snowby dat's workin' up some big game on her. An' she's jiss like ole Daniel in de lion's den, widout nobody to tell her dat de're any'ing but lambs. I'm drefful 'feard fur Missy Clare."

"Can't you tell her?"

"But, I don't know nuffin' to tell! I on'y 'spicion. She won't neber lissen to 'spicions. You know how Daniel got out o' de lion's den, widout de're gettin' a bite outen him?"

"Much I do! Dan who? I never heerd tell of old Dan and ther lions."

"Why, two angels come down an' jiss shet up de lions' mous, so's dey couldn't get a toof in Daniel's hide. Now, see yere, Bully Bob: less you an' me be de angels; Missy Clare is jes' goin' to be devoured by dem human beasts—shuah's my skin ain't wite!"

"A sweet lookin' angel you are!" cried Bob, with a quizzical look.

"Guess dere's brack angels in Heben, 's well's white 'uns," answered Coal indignantly.

"Don't believe thar's any woolly-haired ones, anyhow. But, what's the sport? That's what I'm after. If I'm goin' to be your pard, what am I to do? Let's hear the game, if you've got it laid out."

"It's 'bout de complection ob dis," began Coal with dignity. "We's got to play spies, you an' me. It's ter keep a lef' eye open fur Mass' Allen an' Slowby; an' you's ter keep a right eye open fur Missy Clare's suitor dat I knows is a sharp."

"What's the coon's name?"

"Dunno. Dunno nuffin' 'bout him."

"Then how am I to watch him?"

"Tho't yer had brains 'nough fur dat, 'thou 'structions from a little nig," answered Coal, with dignity.

"If it comes to brains, I guess I am there!" retorted Bob. "But, I fancied that you had some sort o' plan in yer knowledge-box."

"It's jiss dis, Bob," rejoined Coal impressively. "You's got ter go out to sarvice wid Missy Clare. Git her to 'gage you to do t'ings 'bout de house. Dat's my notion. Den you kin watch who comes an' goes an' be on han' in fer 'mergencies."

"Golly fur you, nig! But I ain't got to wear that sort o' rig. I couldn't never go that." He looked askance at Coal's livery.

"I t'ink dat's berry handsome," returned Sam, as he rose and strutted about with importance.

"Mebbe 'tis fur you. But Bully Bob ain't never been in harness, and I ain't goin' into harness. What's more, who told you Miss Clare wanted a boy, or'd hire me?"

"Jiss you leef dat to me! Reckon dis chap's got 'nfluence wid Missy Clare."

"All right, Smoky! It's a lay, then? Judge we're not to know one another when anybody's about?"

"Neber see'd you afore," declared Coal.

"Don't reckernise no feller o' your color," rejoined Bob.

"But, how's we to correspond?"

"Signs! Passwords! That's the idear," cried Bob, with a laugh of triumph at the thought.

"Squat yerself ag'in, and let's lay out the caboodle. I'm sudden death on that sort o' thing."

In fifteen minutes more the partners parted, having laid down a complete system of secret communication, should it become necessary.

CHAPTER II.

A WIDE-AWAKE MESSENGER.

COAL was correct in saying he had influence with his old mistress. Within a week Bully Bob was engaged as general errand-boy in the home of Miss Clara Eldon, the young lady about whom the little darky was so deeply concerned.

It must be said, however, that Miss Eldon had not the faintest idea of the plot laid by the two boys or she would have very quickly packed them off about their business. She felt quite competent to manage her own affairs, and would hardly have chosen these young vagabonds as her guardians.

Fortunately for their plans she did not dream that the lively and active young lad, who looked so spruce in his new suit, was there as a spy upon her visitors, or she would soon have sent him packing.

Arab Bob had never "lived out" before, ex-

cept out of doors, and the house was hardly large enough to hold him. He was overflowing with spirits and activity, and seemed to be in all parts of the house at once, in everybody's way, and making so much mischief wherever he went that he was followed by a rattling fire of scoldings.

He was busily engaged with the inside of a dressing-case, trying to see how the thing was put together, and what was the meaning of all its mysterious contents, when Miss Eldon entered the room.

She was a tall and very handsome girl, with an innocent and confiding look on her gentle face, yet with a proud expression on her lofty brow.

A frown came to her face as she noticed the boy's mysterious maneuvers.

"What are you doing there?" she asked, sternly. "Who gave you leave to meddle with that?"

Bob jerked his head up hastily.

"Dunno how it is, Miss Clara," he began. "Reckon maybe I'm too curious, but I jess would like to know what all them comical contraptions is fur, anyway."

"Keep your hands off of what don't concern you," she testily warned. "I'm getting tired of hearing and seeing mischief. Here, take this letter and deliver it to its address. Do you think you can do it without a blunder?"

"I could read writin' afore I was as tall as a grasshopper," answered Bob, demurely. "Let me see. 'Mr. Milton Somers, 145 Mulberry St.' Guess I kin find them diggin's 'thout much trouble, Miss Clara."

"Very well. Wait for an answer. And be sure and lose no time."

The willing messenger was away like a flash, glad of a chance to be in the street.

The young lady stood looking after him, with a deep trouble in her clear blue eyes. It was plain that something had happened to deeply disturb her. She trembled slightly, and laid her hand on a chair-back for support.

"Oh, can it be?" she cried, passionately, as she took a letter from her pocket and ran her eyes hastily over its contents. "I cannot and will not believe it."

She dashed the epistle to the floor, and set her foot angrily upon it.

"After all that has passed! And he so courteous and seemingly the very soul of honor! And this vile letter anonymous, too! He must and shall explain. I will not believe this vile slander except he confirms it."

She threw herself into a chair and pressed her hands passionately to her eyes, as if to keep back the tears that threatened to start. Miss Eldon was evidently in some deep trouble connected with that letter that lay crushed upon the floor.

Meanwhile the house spy was off with a spry step upon his mission, and with a look of queer meaning upon his face.

"They're a-workin' it, jist as sure as you live," he declared. "Never see'd her tuk so yit, not even the time I put the cat's head in the cream. There's somethin' bu'sted, you bet! I ain't been here all this time 'thout knowin' who Milton Somers is. Why, he's jist as sweet on her as sugar is on pineapple. Sam Charcoal ain't no fool, if he is a nig. There's somethin' workin', and I'm goin' to find out what it is, or bu'st. Bet they've got to git up early in the mornin' to bulldoze us two daisies."

Bob went straight to his destination, for nearly the first time in his life.

He generally managed to travel round Robin Hood's barn in his journeys. But he was interested in this affair, and lost no time on the way.

Reaching the house in question he was ushered into the parlor.

"A letter for Mr. Somers?" repeated the servant. "Very well. I will hand it to him. You can wait here for the answer."

"Not much!" exclaimed Bob, independently. "I was told to pass over that dokyment myself, and I reckon I know how to 'bey orders."

"Why, you nunny, do you suppose I will not give it to him?"

"Ain't tradin' in s'poses, jist now," rejoined the saucy boy. "When I'm told to do a thing, 'specially by a lady, that's the thing I does! So jist don't waste no more chin-music on me."

"You blessed young rascal, do you mean—"

"I don't mean nothin' 'cept biz," broke in Bob, as he seated himself in a chair, and picked up a newspaper from the table. "If you choose to git yerself in hot water, 'tain't my funeral. Guess I'll take in a bit o' news, while ye're makin' up yer mind."

The pompous servant looked angrily at the nonchalant boy, as if in doubt whether to kick

him out of doors or not. But Bob sat there reading the newspaper as coolly as if there were nothing in the world to trouble his brain about.

After a minute the servant jerked himself angrily out of the parlor, having sense enough to know that the boy was not to be mastered by him.

In a few minutes he returned. Bob was still reading the news.

"Follow me," he ordered, angrily. "Mr. Somers consents to see you. I didn't tell him about your impudence, or I know he'd ordered me to bundle you out of doors."

"That was very kind o' you," answered Bob, coolly, as he deliberately folded up his paper. "I'll du as much fur you some time. Ailers keep an even keel—that's the rule I sail under."

He followed the angry serving-man from the room, with as little care for his spleen as if he had been a street-scavenger whom the Arab delighted in stirring up.

Soon the door of an up-stairs room was reached and opened.

"This is the boy, Mr. Somers, that wants to see your honor," he announced.

Bob walked quietly in, and found himself in a handsomely-furnished gentleman's apartment, got up with all the necessities of bachelor comfort. The occupant, clad in a rich dressing-gown, stood in the center of the floor, with an expectant look.

He was a tall, slender, well-formed young man, handsome and intelligent in face, a long silken mustache adorning his upper lip, while his hair hung in careless folds down upon his forehead. There was more in his face than the look of the mere society man.

"You have a letter for me?" he demanded.

"You're Mr. Milton Somers, is 'pose?"

"That is my name."

"Then I reckon this here 'pistle's fur you."

"Sit down. I will see if there's an answer."

The boy seated himself, with his eyes fixed on the gentleman's face. He was curious about that letter.

Mr. Somers started slightly on noticing the address. He appeared to recognize the handwriting. He turned away and pressed the letter furtively to his lips. But the movement did not escape the boy's sharp eyes, and a queer smile passed over his face.

Mr. Somers quickly opened the envelope and cast his eyes over the contents of the letter which it contained.

On doing so he started violently, while a sharp exclamation came from his lips. He continued to read, his face growing pale and intensely disturbed.

"Good heavens!" he cried, pressing his hand to his brow with an air of distraction. "What does this mean? Who can have told her?" The letter fell from his hands, and he turned with a blinded look in his eyes. "Ha, boy!" he exclaimed. "You here? Who gave you this letter? Answer me! Who gave you this letter?"

"Ain't she put her signatoor to the bottom?" queried Bob. "Anyhow it was Miss Clara Eldon, and nobody shorter."

"It is false! It cannot be! She never wrote that terrible—" He paused suddenly, as if with a return of memory. Then he stooped and picked up the fallen missive and cast his eyes over it once more, while his face worked with intense emotion.

"Got hit 'tween wind and water that time," said Bob to himself. "When Miss Clara pulls the trigger she shoots to hit, you bet!"

Mr. Somers had thrown himself heavily in a chair, crushing the letter in one hand, while his pale and distracted face rested on the other.

"S'pose ther's an answer," suggested Bob. "Miss Clara said so, anyhow."

"Yes—No—By Heaven, I don't know what to say or think! Wait! I will write!"

He drew to himself a sheet of paper, seized a pen, and dashed off a reply with impulsive haste. When near the bottom of the page, however, he paused, hesitated, pressed his hand strongly on his forehead, and then snatched up the written sheet and tore it to fragments.

"No, no! Tell Miss-Eldon I will see her. I will be there this evening. That will do. There is no other answer."

He hurried Bob hastily out of the room; then shut and locked the door, flinging himself in his chair with a furious movement.

"The spite of it!" he ejaculated. "That that old thing, which I fancied buried forever, should come up now, to spite me! And I cannot explain! I dare not explain! Who has told her this? What enemy of mine has worked this scheme? By Heaven, I could tear him limb from limb! I would sooner lose my life now, than lose that girl, who is tenfold more to me than life."

Bob had, meanwhile, regained the street. There was a queer look of intelligence upon his face.

"Never see'd nobody took so afore!" he declared. "Why, if he'd swallowed a dose o' dynamite he couldn't been wuss upset. Ther's a screw loose somewhere. Ther's some sports a-gunnin' arter Miss Clara, but I reckon she got in a snap-shot on Somers, that time. Wouldn't I give somethin' nice to know what's in that letter? Well, maybe I wouldn't."

He paused. His keen eyes had just caught sight of a familiar face in advance. It was the night-hued countenance of Sam Charcoal, whose eyes twinkled as he came up.

"Glad to see yer, pard," exclaimed Bob. "Jist the coon I was cogertatin' on. What's afloat? Anything bu'sted?"

Coal's black face looked important as he replied:

"Det'ing's workin', shuah. Been spyin' 'round dem dar swells, an' now I knows dar's mischief in de wind. Dey's playin' some deep, bad game, Bob. But, you neber see'd nobody jiss quite so wide-awake as Marse Allen an' Slowby. Come near gittin' cotched lissenin', lass night, an' I know dey'd pare my ears slick off ef dey cotched me."

"Never mind the ears. What ye learned by listenin'? Things is gittin' up to b'ilin' heat, an' you're got to track them coons. I'm gittin' my work in, and you've got to do your sheer."

"What you done?" demanded Coal, his black face gleaming with interest. "Knowed dar were sumfin' up. Kinder smelt um. What you done, Bully?"

"Squat yerself, and I'll tell you all about it."

For the next ten minutes the boy pards were deep in consultation over Bob's discovery. It was unanimously voted that they were on an important track, and that Bob should do his best to find out what it all meant. Meanwhile Coal would take some risks to get at the secrets of his precious pair of masters, for he was sure they were at the bottom of whatever game was afoot.

The messenger was a half-hour late on reaching home. He found Miss Eldon waiting for him, with a face of great impatience.

"What has kept you? Have you the answer? Let me have it at once!"

"Can't be did," answered Bob. "That there answer's in the waste basket, ripped inter five hundred pieces. Dunno what you writ him, Miss Clara, but you *did* fotch him heavy. You never see'd a chap knocked so squally."

"Why, what do you mean? What did he do? What did he say? Answer at once! Did he send no reply?"

She extended her hand as if tempted to shake the story out of the boy, while her face was full of impatience.

"He's goin' to drop round to-night to tell you all 'bout it. Guess he wants to git his brains together, fur he was the wussest upset-coon when he read that letter o' yourn that you ever hearn tell on."

Miss Eldon seemed about to ask some more questions. Then with a sudden recollection of propriety she turned hastily away and left the room, while Bob remained, following her retreating form with a very knowing look.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST MOVE IN THE GAME.

In a neatly-furnished apartment of a house on one of the uptown streets sat two men. They were fashionably dressed and generally well got up personages, with an air about them of the young man about town—good-looking, sharp and knowing. A judge of faces might have said they were more wide awake than honest, but their genteel dress and easy ways were well calculated to deceive the unsuspicious.

They were the two men of whom Coal had spoken—Tom Allen and Harry Slowby, a pair of swells who were necessarily always "on the make"—as they lived wholly "on their wits"—as do a considerable number of men in every big city.

Allen was seated in an easy-chair, playing idly with the tassel of his smoking-cap. Slowby stood by the mantle, resting one elbow on it, and holding a cigar in the fingers of the other hand.

"What's to be done now, Tom?" asked the latter. "You see how the thing stands. Our game hasn't half worked. They've had an explanation, confound it."

"No they haven't," retorted Tom. "He'd sooner sell his head than let *that* cat out of the bag."

"I tell you they have then. Didn't I see her yesterday, when she was twice as blue as indigo?"

The Daisy Detectives.

She had just read that precious letter. And today she's as bright as a bee. Don't tell me. He's made a clean breast of it."

"You don't know him," persisted Tom. "He may have satisfied her scruples some way, but he has never told her *that* story."

"But what the blazes is to be done? That's what I want to know?" demanded Harry, impatiently.

"Just what we laid out. I'm going to marry the girl and pocket the prize."

"Share the prize you mean."

"Of course you come in for your share."

Had they looked behind them at this moment they might have seen the closet door at the other side of the room slightly ajar and a woolly head and black face behind it, the eyes rolling with delight and interest.

"But what is your plan now?" asked Harry, curiously. "It looks to me as if the first step had been a dead failure."

"And Tom Allen a stupid fool, eh? Hardly! That was only putting in the wedge. We've got to drive it in now."

"How?"

"I haven't been asleep, my boy. There's a letter on its way to Somers now that will lure him to our rendezvous out on 65th street. Then a close carriage, and Jack Brace for a driver, and we whisk him away to—you know where. He won't get back to trouble us in a hurry."

Charcoal's eyes looked as if they would drop out of his head, by the way they rolled on hearing this. In his excitement he had visibly opened the door.

"By Jove, you have been at work! But, what's behind all this?"

"Hang it, Harry Slowby, I hope you aren't quite a fool. See here!"

He held up his hand and touched his fingers one after another.

"First, Somers disappears, and Clara is in despair. Then comes a letter from him saying that that anonymous charge was all true, and he can never look her in the face again. Then you drop in, and let fall that Milton Somers has been arrested in Baltimore on a charge of theft and forgery. Then the girl grows indignant and furious. She cuts him out of her book. I step in at the nick of time. She is willing to be consoled. And she is so hurt that she is ready to take anybody out of revenge—you see?"

"By Jupiter, Tom, you're a trump! Give me your hand. It *must* work. Never heard a neater plot."

While the two precious confederates were shaking hands over their rascally plot the closet-door closed, and ten fingers were thrust into the boy's woolly hair. It was the only way Charcoal had to keep down his feelings.

"What's that?" cried Tom, sharply. "Wasn't there some noise back there?"

"Only that mouse that's always playing back of the plaster."

"Well, let's get out of this. We must make our arrangements. This is a risky thing, and there must be no loose kinks."

"That's so," answered Harry. "A failure now would play the very Old Nick with our chances."

They left the room together, closing the door sharply behind them.

Ere the sound of their footsteps had died away in the passage the closet door opened, and Sam Charcoal made his appearance, his black countenance glistening with importance.

"Fore de Laud, ef 'tain't jiss 'nuff to take all de kinks outer Charcoal's hair!" he cried. "Neber heerd nuffin so squamosin in all my born days! So de're gwine to scoop in Missy Clare, de poor, innercent chile, bress her soul! Guess somehow, dough, dey's disremembered Sambo Charcoal! Oh, de marcy! wouldn't dey skin dis nig if dey knowed! Well, dey would! But dar's work to do now, an' Bully an' his cullud pard must put dar heads togedder—shuah!"

Within five minutes Coal was out of the house, and making his way toward Miss Eldon's mansion. His first idea had been to follow his masters, and try and discover the locality of their 65th street den. But, he soon saw that that would not do. His face would have sold him at a glance. Buttermilk must be put on the track.

Coal knew 'the ropes' of Miss Eldon's house, and soon made his way back to the kitchen windows. Gazing in he caught sight of Bob, who was paring potatoes for the cook. Bob was just smart enough to know which side his bread was buttered; so he kept in the good graces of the cook.

A light tap at the window attracted his attention, and a sight of Coal's ebony face and of the

fingers making signs, warned him to come forth at once.

A quick start upset the pan, and sent the potatoes rolling over the floor.

"What's that?" cried the cook from the inner room.

"The blasted cat guv me a skeer," explained Bob, "and 'way went the 'taters."

"Pick 'em up ag'in, and git out o' this! Don't want nobody round here that's skeered by a cat."

Coal's head was up again, and he was making the danger signs agreed upon between the boys.

Bob lost no time in flinging the potatoes back into the pan, heaping the parings over them, and darting out of the kitchen door.

"What is it?" he asked eagerly, when the boys had squatted themselves cosily by the side of the house. "Ther's somethin' loose, or you wouldn't be howlin' round here, this way."

"Guess you'd better b'lieb," answered Coal, with an important look. "Dere's de biggest bit o' bacon in de pan as you eber heern tell on. An' de way it's fryin' is jist 'mazin'! Keep mum now, an' I'll tell you all 'bout 'um."

He proceeded to detail the story of his discovery, much to Bob's interest and indignation. Things were getting ripe, that was sure. Something had to be done at once, that was evident.

After a long consultation the boys agreed upon their plan of action.

It was important that Mr. Somers should be warned of the plot that had been laid against him, and that Miss Eldon should be advised of "what was in the wind."

"I'll go fur Somers," said Bob. "He's seen me afore, and I guess I kin easy git a confab with him."

"Lemme go fur Missy Clare. Dat chile ain't neber furgotted Coal, an' she knows he won't say nuffin dat ain't de Gospel trufe."

The boys parted on their separate errands—Bob to see Mr. Somers and let him know what had been arranged for his special benefit by the two scoundrels, and Coal to do the same for his once mistress.

Both were destined to disappointment. Mr. Somers was out. He had received a letter, so Bob was told, and had gone out, saying he would not be home till midnight.

Coal had the same bad luck. Miss Eldon was out, and would not return till late, as she was going to the opera.

Coal made his way home again. There was nothing more to be done that evening, that seemed sure; but Bob was not so easily reconciled. Somers had evidently received the luring letter of the confederates, and had been taken in by it. There would be no chance to warn him. What to do puzzled the boy for awhile, but he was too sharp to be long at a loss how to act.

Sixty-fifth street he knew was on the outer edge of the city. It could not be much built up. There was but one thing for it. He *must* make his way out there, and put himself on the watch.

It was a long tramp, and night was near at hand when the young spy found himself at length on the spot.

He was now transformed back into his old street vagabond identity. He had discarded his spruce rig, and put on his ragged suit. He did not know what he might have to go through, and was too proud of his new clothes to run the risk of spoiling them.

The street in question he found to be nearly open country. It contained one or two short rows of houses, and here and there an isolated building, but the city had not fairly got that far out yet, and most of the line of the street was not opened.

Bob patrolled it back and forth wearily for some time, trying to find out what building was most likely to be the head-quarters of the villains.

After a while he settled on a solitary house, that stood somewhat back from the line of the street, and was yet thickly surrounded by trees. It looked in the darkness just the place for a conspiracy. A single light shone in one of the lower windows, but all else was gloom and silence.

Bob stationed himself on the fence opposite. He felt it in his bones that he had lit on the right spot. He was bound to "watch this crib for all it was worth," as he announced to himself.

The hours passed away. All seemed dead about the mansion. Not a soul entered or left it, and not a sign of life appeared, beyond that solitary light in the lower window.

The young spotter grew impatient, and began to fear that he was on a false scent. He looked around him. The only place where any life ap-

peared was in a building several hundred yards away. Here lights were moving about, and the sound of voices and laughter could be heard.

He got down from his fence-rail and walked toward it. It was worth examining, at any rate.

When he got close at hand he found that the house in question had the appearance of a country tavern. A number of persons were seated on the porch that ran in front, and the lights he had seen flashed from the open bar-room behind.

He walked past, surveying the place closely.

"'Tain't there," he decided, shaking his head. "Too much gab, and too many folks, fur dirty work round *that* shanty. That ain't the sort o' den as I'm after. Calculate I'll wear ship and steer back fur t'other shanty."

He turned to seek his former post of observation. But several things, unknown to him, had occurred during his absence. A personage had come up the street from the other direction and entered the building. The light he had so long watched had disappeared. When he resumed his seat on the fence the house was as black as Sam Charcoal's face!

Bob scratched his head. He would have jumped down and made a round of the building and grounds, but for fear of dogs. He had heard a fierce barking an hour before that made him dubious. He was no coward, but did not care to wake up strange dogs in the darkness.

A half-hour more he waited, and then sounds came to his ears. There were voices, the neigh of a horse, and the bang of a loud-shutting door.

Something was evidently taking place in the rear region of the house. He remembered what Coal had told him about the project to carry off the victim in a close carriage.

Too impatient to remain in doubt any longer he sprung from the fence and approached the house. He was bound to find out what was going on, dogs or no dogs.

He had passed through the gateway, and was slipping round the corner of the mansion, when he heard the sound of hoofs and wheels. A carriage was evidently approaching.

Bob slipped back into the shadow of a big bush and waited. He could see a pair of dark horses, and then a carriage, with a stout fellow on the box.

It passed him and turned into the carriage-way leading to the street. There was but one thing for it. In a moment he was on behind, with his feet on the springs, and his hands clinging to the curtain-straps that hung loosely down.

Away they whirled into the street, and along at a brisk pace that soon took them past the tavern. The lights of the latter revealed the boy clinging on behind, and a laughing shout of "cut behind" warned the driver of his unwelcome passenger.

With a growl of rage the burly coachman rose on his seat, and sent his whip-lash whirling round the rear of the carriage.

The lash took the boy in a tender spot so suddenly that before he hardly knew it he had let go his hold, and tumbled back into the dusty road, while the carriage whirled on at a rapid speed.

Bob rose slowly to his feet, with a very rueful countenance, rubbing the spot where he had felt the whip.

A shout of laughter from the porch roused his ire, and he turned to the merry loungers with a look of sullen fury, but he could say nothing.

For a moment the scent of the game was lost. Was Somers really in the carriage, and if so, what would be his fate?

Bully Bob would have given his best suit of clothes to have been restored to his perch on that rapidly disappearing vehicle.

CHAPTER IV.

A CLOSET IMP.

Two days have passed since Bob's discomfiture.

Tom Allen now sits alone in his apartment, a newspaper before his eyes and a cigar in his hand. With his feet on the chair before him he is decidedly taking the world easily.

The closet door behind him, again ajar, reveals the ebony countenance of Sam Charcoal, now marked with a look of deep anxiety.

"Got cotched dis time," said the spy to himself, as his eyes gazed uneasily around the room. "Ain't nuffin' to be found out, 'cept me. Golly, won't I be fotched out 'mazin' fast ef Marse Tom twiggs me yere."

He looked cautiously around. The room door was a crack open. He might creep to it and escape without disturbing the reader. He was pushing the closet door slowly open for this pur-

pose when he was startled by a hasty step outside the room.

The next moment Harry Slowby entered and closed the door sharply behind him. His face was pale and excited.

Allen looked quickly around, and then sprung to his feet.

"What's wrong now? Something sprung a leak?" he demanded.

"You bet," answered Harry, as he flung himself into a chair.

"Somers hasn't broke loose?"

"Not much. He's safe enough."

"What is it, then?"

"It's that confounded woman."

"Ha! Let it out. By Jove, you're enough to set a man's teeth on edge."

"The whole game's gone wrong, that's all."

"Gone wrong?"

"Yes. I can't see what ails her. She vows that Somers has been lied about by enemies. I told her of the arrest, but she won't swallow it. I tell you, Tom, your cake's all dough. She is sweeter on him than ever."

"But the letter? His own handwriting, acknowledging the corn? She must have received that."

"She don't swallow that either," answered Harry, kicking out his heels spitefully. "She declares it isn't his writing. She believes it is a forgery, got up by his enemies. I don't know what to make of it."

"There's a screw loose somewhere," declared Tom. "The cat has got out of the bag somehow. She's too innocent to have worked up all those suspicions herself. There's somebody working against us."

"I begin to fear so," chimed in Harry.

"Guess dis chile's got sumfin' ob de same notion," ran through Coal's head, while his face expanded into a broad grin. "Laws-a-marcy, ef dey knowed who put de salt in dat puddin' wouldn't dis nig catch it! Dem catermounts sha'n't neber gobble up Missy Clare while Coal's got him eyes open."

The two sports did not dream of what was going on behind them, and continued their conversation.

Tom flung his cigar down spitefully, as if it had burned him.

"You've sold the pass, somehow," he cried. "You've talked too much to the woman."

"That's all stuff, Tom Allen, and you know it," was the angry reply. "I don't post myself for a fool."

"Somebody has done it. Who then?"

"Don't ask me."

"I'm bound to have her, by good or bad," cried Tom, savagely. "I've gone too far in this business to draw back now."

"And there's too much money in it."

"That's so. Do you think of anything?"

"There's nothing better than a good scare," suggested Harry, with a meaning look.

"Ha! What's your idea?"

"Serve her as we've served her lover," was the reply. "Lure her out to the 65th-street place. Then whisk her off to the country den. Give her a bad scare there. Leave me to manage that. Then you come in as her rescuer, and marry her off-hand, while she is full of gratitude."

"I'll do it," cried Tom. "It's a promising idea. But how to get her to take the first step."

"Another letter from Milton Somers will do it. He must suggest that he is in hiding in 65th street, and must see her at once and privately, on a question of life and death."

"Hang it, Harry, it's risky, but we're in for the whole porker now. Hand me that pen and that letter of Somers's. I bet I imitate the writing so he would swear he wrote it himself if he should see it."

Harry turned quickly to the table for the pen. In doing so his eyes fell on the closet.

In an instant a fierce oath came from his lips, and he leaped across the room, and flung open the door with a savage jerk.

The next instant he had Charcoal by the hair, and was dragging him from his hiding-place, the boy's teeth chattering with fear, and his eyes rolling wildly.

"So, here's the mouse that's nibbling our cheese," cried the captor. "I just caught a glimpse of this flat-nosed young hound, peeping from the closet. Stand up, you imp of Satan, or I'll murder you on the spot."

He lifted Coal upright by the hair, till the scared boy howled with fright and pain.

"Hiding and spying, is he?" yelled Tom, springing to his feet in a rage. "So that's where the leak is in our job!"

"Eure de laur, gemmen, dis chile don't know nuffin' 'bout um," declared the boy, with chat-

tering teeth. "Guess I got asleep in dar, an' you waked me up talkin'. Dat's de solid trufe, now."

"You lie, you hound!" cried Harry, savagely kicking his prisoner. "I know you, blast you! You used to live with Miss Eldon."

"Oh de marcy!" screamed Coal, dropping on his knees in terror. "Dat was on'y when I were a little pickaninny baby. Luff me go, Marse Slowby. Luff me go, an' I'll neber, neber—"

"Shut your frying-pan before I burst it," cried the villain, giving Coal a back slap with his hand across the lips. "You've been spying, you black rat. What's to be done, Tom? Shall I choke the dog?"

"Kick him up-stairs, and lock him into the garret room," suggested Tom. "Leave him there till we've had time to think this thing over. If it's he that's done it I'll lend a hand to smash in his thick skull myself."

Without further words the infuriated captor dragged Coal from the room, still grasping him by the hair, and heedless of the boy's yells of pain. Up two flights of stairs he dragged him, cursing at every step, and finally gained the door of a small room, at the top of the house.

This he opened, and flung the little ducky in, with a final kick that sent him spinning half across the room.

"You'll never get out of there alive, you black vagabond," cried the furious villain. "I'll murder you myself, if Tom Allen don't. You shall never spoil our plans by your long tongue."

He sharply closed and locked the door. Coal lay groaning and howling on the floor, as much from fear as pain. The sound of the retreating footsteps of his foe were as loud to him as the blows of sledge-hammers on the floor.

It was fifteen minutes before the prisoner raised himself from the spot where he had fallen, and began to collect his scattered wits together.

"I done gone and fixed 'em now, for suah," he declared, with a look of spite. "Oh, de bressed masser, didn't he kick an' didn't he pull! An' I jiss speck he'll cut my froat. Dey won't—dassen't luff me out."

Coal took another roll and another groan to relieve his feelings. Then he rose to his feet, and began to kick himself and punch his head with his clinched fists.

"Dat's what you 'sarve, you mis'able fool nigger!" he declared. "Take dat an' l'arn some sense. Couldn't keep yer head in dat dar closet, but must keep pokin' it out. Got a mighty notion to chop yer ears off to l'arn you sumfin'. Neber see'd sich a fool in all my born days."

After a few minutes, however, this exercise began to grow monotonous, and Coal let up on it.

He brought himself to anchor on a wooden chair, ran his fingers into his hair, and set himself down to think.

In fact the situation was one that called for some thought. The game of the young scouts had so far failed, and the conspirators had the whip hand.

Mr. Somers was in quod, somewhere, and Bob had been thrown off the track. And now Miss Eldon was in serious danger from the plot formed against her, and her young guardian was in difficulty.

"Dey'll neber luff me out, dat's suah," cogitated Coal. "Missy Clare's a dead goner. S'peck dey'll luff me yere to starve. Or mebbe dey'll put rats in yere to chaw me up. Dar's nuffin' drefful dey won't do."

He sat conjuring up horrors until his hair was ready to stand on end. Finally, terrified by his own fancies, he ran like a wild bull across the room, and plunged headforemost against the door, with force enough to go through a half-inch plank.

But there was no give in the stout door. It was thick and strong, and the lock was firm. His captors knew very well what they were about when they locked their prisoner in that room.

Hours passed by, and Coal remained there in desolate misery. Night came on. Worn out by his torments he flung himself on a couch in the corner of the room. His brain was in a stew yet, but he was always a good sleeper, and after an hour he fell off into a deep snooze.

It was broad daylight when he woke again. The sun was shining brightly into the single small window of the room. On the floor by the door lay a basin of coarse food, which had been put there during his sleep.

"Dey ain't gwine to starve de nig, anyhow," grumbled Coal. "S'peck dey're savin' me fur a barbecue. Know dey'll squash me somehow. Shouldn't wonder if dey's put p'ison in dat grub."

He eyed it doubtfully for some minutes. But hunger was stronger than fear, and he finally

made an assault on the provender that quickly emptied the pan.

His night's sleep and his morning's breakfast put new spirit in the boy. He began to examine things more closely than he had done the night before.

The room, as we have said, was a small one at the top of the house, with a single window opening out on the sloping roof. He tried the door again, but it was too firm to be moved. The window looked down into a deep yard that seemed like a well at the rear of the three story house.

Coal looked at it in despair. He could never get out that way without breaking his neck.

Yet there was something of the cat about the boy, and ere long he had crawled out of the window onto the roof and down the latter to the eaves, at the imminent risk of slipping on the moss-grown shingles, and tumbling thirty feet to the pavement below.

It was a dangerous outlook. He clung to the gutter and craned his head over the eaves. Three feet below him was the top of one of the third story windows. He looked at it hopefully. If he could reach that. But how was he to do it?

After vainly endeavoring to form a plan he crawled back up the roof to the window of his prison, and made his way again into the room.

Coal had on his thinking-cap, yet he studied for a good hour without just seeing how he was going to get out of his scrape.

At length his eye fell on a large nail, that was driven firmly in the window-sill. He caught sight at the same time of the blanket that formed the principal covering of his bed.

"Golly!" he cried, rolling his eyes from one to the other. "Dat's 'um, suah."

He thrust both hands into his pockets. One of them came out holding a pocket-knife. It had but one whole blade in it, but Coal viewed it with great satisfaction.

"Guess I'm gwine ter git outer dis shanty," he cried, dancing with delight. "Jiss wait till night comes. Won't do to try nuffin' in daylight, kase dere mought be sharp eyes round somewhar."

The day seemed a month long to the impatient boy. It passed without an incident. Evidently his captors thought they had given him enough for one day's eating, for no one came near him.

Twilight came at last, and night followed, with a cloudy, starless sky.

"Reckon I'm gwine now," said Coal.

His first operation was to cut the blanket into long strips, of some six inches wide. These he tied together, and twisted into a rope-like form. Then he fastened one end firmly to the nail in the window-sill, and threw the remainder out on the roof, letting it dangle down. He looked at his work with a critical eye.

"Guess de nig ain't heavy 'nough to bu'st dat," he said. "Yere goes, anyhow."

Scrambling down to the gutter, he caught the dangling rope and let himself over the eaves. It stretched with his weight, yet did not give way. Down it he went, hand over hand, with the agility of a sailor.

He was soon at its end, swinging between heaven and earth. But just before him was the window which was the goal of his enterprise.

Holding desperately to the rope with one hand and with his teeth, he reached the other hand to the sash, which he lifted with the utmost caution. It moved easily, and soon displayed a wide aperture.

It was a question if anybody was in the room. But it was neck or nothing with Coal. There was no going back.

Grasping the sill firmly he released his other hand, still holding the blanket rope with his teeth. In a moment more he had a firm hold of the sill, and was cautiously crawling into the window.

All was still within. Not a sound or a breath broke the silence. Setting his feet to the floor he looked about him in the gloom.

"Know whar I am now," he declared. "Lawsee, won't dem gemman sports be cornfiscated when dey comes to look fur Coal? I'm gwine to leab dese diggin's, right squar."

The door opened to his touch. The hall outside was dark, but Coal knew every step of the house. Carefully avoiding any noise, within five minutes he was safely in the street, a free boy once more. Messrs. Allen and Slowby's schemes were again in danger.

CHAPTER V.

SCOUTS ON A BENDER.

TWO more days had passed. It was a bright and pleasant May morning in the open country.

The Daisy Detectives.

spires of the city were visible in the distance, but here the birds sung, the green grass waved, and prattling streams ran gayly onward.

Two boys, Bob and Coal, sat on the edge of a green bank, their feet dangling over. They had recently met at this place of appointment, and were busy in comparing notes.

"Speck you follered Marse Slowby, an' found out whar he's hidin'," said Coal.

Bob was whistling to a blue-bird on a neighboring maple, and was in no hurry to answer.

"Not much," he answered, after a while. "Got dung. S'pose you tracked Jack Brace."

"He druv too fast, dat's de fact," admitted Coal. "Luff me behind, de wuss way."

"Then we're both at sea," remarked Bob. "Neither one can't fling dust at t'other."

In fact, the boys had been busy since the era of Coal's escape. Clara Eldon had disappeared, and the natural conclusion was that the villains had succeeded in their plot to carry her off.

The young scouts were satisfied that both the abducted persons were imprisoned at some stronghold in the country, but before anything could be done to release them this place must be found.

The only way to find it was to track the conspirators. Coal was afraid to fall under the eyes of his masters, so Bob undertook to track them. Coal put himself on the trail of Jack Brace, the driver from the 65th-street house, who might lead him to the hiding-place.

As we have just seen, they both had failed.

"How fur did you foller him?" queried Bob.

"Bout two mile."

"Long a straight road?"

"Yes."

"And I follered my man three miles, out the Ridge.—See here, Coal, I've got an idee. You've heern tell of a bee-line, I reckon."

"Dunno what dat am, nohow," averred the ducky.

"Why, you see, the bee-hunters catch two bees, a long ways apart. They guv 'em some honey, and the bees fly off straight fur the hive. Then the hunters follow by the two lines, and where these lines cross, there's the hive. It's generally a holler tree, chock-full o' honey."

"Golly!" cried Coal, licking his lips. "Wish I war one o' dem hunters."

"That's jist what you are," answered Bob. "We've got our bee-lines laid. You foller the road that Jack Brace took, and I'll foller the one that old Slowby took. Where them there two roads cross is the bee's nest."

"But dar ain't no honey in it."

"Dunno 'bout that. That's the only way to find Mr. Somers and Miss Clare. Are you on it?"

"Guess I is den, wuss dan a Georgy nigger on a watermelon."

"Then slide's the word, fur every minute counts. We don't know what them rascals is doin' while we're talkin'."

A few more words fixed the plans of the boys, when they parted, each to carry out his share of the programme.

Two hours afterward each was on his bee-line, following it with a boy's ardent hope of success in his plans.

It was a long journey and a warm day. The boys were not the owners of bicycles, and had a long and weary trudge before them.

Night came on. Bob snoozed it out under a roadside hedge. Coal, who loved warm quarters, crept into a farmer's barn, and buried himself in the hay-mow. The next day they were on the road again at an early hour.

Bob had crossed the Schuylkill river at Manayunk, knowing his comrade's road lay on the other side. He stopped at a roadside grocer's and bought himself a breakfast of crackers and cheese.

Ten o'clock came and passed. He was now many miles from the city. He began to despair of success in his project. The chances were fifty to one against his meeting Coal.

"Don't b'lieve I'm as smart as I thought I were," he said discontentedly. "Ain't a-goin' on this way till I fotch Canady, you bet. Guess I mought as well turn back. Hello! What's that?"

He fell as if he had been shot, and half-buried himself in the long grass by the roadside.

What he had seen was an open carriage driving rapidly along the road toward him. But his hasty exclamation came from the fact that he had recognized something familiar in the driver.

The carriage drove rapidly up and passed. Bob lay on his back in the long grass, seemingly looking up into the sky.

Yet a sly wink came to his eye as the vehicle rolled on.

"Kinder likes a mornin' drive, Mr. Slowby does, I reckon. Guess I'll take a trudge arter him."

Good luck had thrown in his way the man of all others he wanted to see. He was on his feet and after the carriage before it was a hundred yards away.

He followed as fast as he could well go. But the horse outtrotted him, and before a half-hour was far out of sight ahead.

But the road was a straight one. He trudged on hopefully.

In this part of the country the houses were very much scattered. They were mostly farm-houses, with a small village of out-buildings clustered about them.

Twelve o'clock found him at a spot where the road wound very near the banks of the Schuylkill, though it ran along a high ridge, some forty feet above the river.

Just here there were a couple of houses, built on the edge of the hill between the road and the river. They were stone structures, and stood about two hundred feet apart, overlooking the country for miles on the opposite side of the stream.

Bob, who was tired from his long tramp, and who was beginning to feel hungry again, mounted to the top rail of the roadside fence, pulled out the remainder of his bag of cheese and crackers, and began to munch his dinner.

"Sorter quiet 'bout them there two shanties," he muttered. "Wonder if anybody lives there. Bet them houses was built in the Revolution. Look strong enough for forts. Folks say ther' used ter be lively scrimmages round about here."

"Guess dey's more libe dan you t'inks, mebbe," came a well-known voice near him.

Bob sprang from the fence as if he had been stung by a hornet, and looked eagerly around him.

There, peering through the bottom rails of the fence, was the ebony face of Sam Charcoal in a broad grin of delight.

"Guess brack Sam's walked him sheer o' de bee-line," he said, with a gurgling laugh. "Gum us some o' dem dar crackers, Bob Buttermilk. Ain't gwine to gobble 'em all yerself."

"Hello, Coal!" cried Bob, in amazement. "Tain't you for sure? How did you git here?"

"Didn't come in no kerrige. Guess dese flat-boats toted me 'long."

Coal was on his feet now.

"Jiss been yere 'bout an hour. Say, Bob," the ducky's face grew very mysterious. "See dem dar habertutions?"

"Reckon I ain't stone blind," retorted Bob. "Dar's sumfin' s'picious 'bout dem."

"You don't say so."

"De're jiss too much like graveyards. See'd a buggy drive in dis next one, 'bout an hour ago. Ain't been a move since."

"A buggy? An hour ago?" cried Bob, with sudden interest. "What was the hoss like?"

"Twasn't a dark bay?"

"Guess so. Wid white nose, an' white hind heels. Gum me some crackers, Bob."

"Here, take 'em all."

Bob thrust the bag into his hands, while he danced a hasty jig on the path, and flung his cap into the air.

"I'll swow if that ain't the biggest thing out. You didn't see who was in the buggy?"

"Didn't see nuffin' 'cept de back on 'um," answered Coal, as well as he could for the handful of crackers he had thrust into his mouth.

"Then I'll tell you, for I twigged him lively. It was that ugly sport of a Harry Slowby. Reckon he thinks he's fast, but he's a bit too slow this time. If we ain't got our bees trailed to ther' hive, then I don't know nothin' 'bout squalls, that's all."

"Golly, dat's nice. 'Mose as nice as crackers an' cheese. Come ober yere, Bob. Mought be eyes 'round dar somewhar. We's got ter keep shady now."

Bob jumped over the fence and nestled in the thick grass in which Coal had been hiding. He recognized that the ducky was right. Great caution was now necessary.

For several hours they lay there. The grass grew rank and high at that spot, and quite hid them from the road, along which footmen and carriages occasionally came. But it seemed very little traveled.

From where they lay the houses could be easily observed. All seemed deathly still about them. It was the one nearest them into whose yard the buggy had turned, and to this their attention was mainly directed.

This business grew tiresome after a time, and

the scouts began to get uneasy. It was not in their brisk young blood to lie and wait for something to turn up. They felt more like turning something up.

This was specially the case with Bob. Coal was more inclined to take things easy.

"Somethin's got to be done, or I'll bu'st," declared Bob, impatiently. "I'm goin' to 'vestigate that there house."

"Won't neber do now," answered the cautious ducky. "Wait till it gits dark."

"Then let's flunk over to that bit o' woods, and go fishin' or bird's-nestin'. Got to do somethin' to kill time."

"Hush!" warned Coal. "Keep mum. Yere's sumfin' comin'." He laid his hand on Bob's shoulder and pushed him down into the grass. "Fore de Laud, ef I don't b'lieb it's de t'other one ob dem dar rascals, Marse Tom Allen."

The carriage to which he referred was now close at hand. It drove up and past them. Coal's eyes twinkled with satisfaction. He had recognized its driver at a glance. It was indeed Tom Allen.

But to the surprise of the scouts it did not turn in to the nearest house, as they expected. It drove past, and in a minute after drew out of the road at the second house, and drove round to the stable at the rear.

The boys looked at one another in astonishment.

"Well, dat am queer, suah!" ejaculated Coal, with eyes like saucers.

"Looks as if they had both shanties on their string," remarked Bob.

"Wonder if dey owns all de houses round yere."

"They're old hands now, you bet. See here, Coal. Them chaps has got two prisoners that they want to keep apart. It's my notion that they've got 'em in them two houses. Miss Clara's in that fur house, 'cause Tom Allen's her lover. Consequently Mr. Somers must be in this near house. Things is beginning to pan out lively."

"By gum, it look dat dar way."

"Jist you see here, Coal. You go fur that house, 'cause you know Miss Clara best. I'll go fur this, 'cause I know Somers."

"Mighty easy ter talk 'bout goin' fer 'um," answered Coal. "But how's we to do it? Dat's what I wants ter know."

"We've got to wait till night, to begin on."

"Reckon I knows dat, anyhow."

"Then we've got to smell round and find out how to git in. Got to use yer brains, if you've got any, Coal. I'm goin' to use all mine, and ain't got none to lend you."

"Dar's a big tree grows up wid its branches on de roof ob dat dar house," remarked Coal. "Den dar's a big chimbley. Dat's my road. Used to trabel wid a chimbley sweep, an' knows all 'bout 'em."

"That's gay," cried Bob, with enthusiasm. "Ain't no sich tree to my howe, or I mought try it on myself. Guess if you takes the top I'll go fur the bottom. Been lookin' at them cellar winders, and they look kinder open."

Slowly the day slid onward. The boys, weary of their watch, made their way to the woodland that lay near and took an afternoon's snooze on a bed of green moss. It was best to get what sleep they could, for they might need it badly before they had another good chance. They would need all their wits, and did not care to go to their dangerous work worn out.

It was an hour or two after nightfall when they made their way back to the vicinity of the two doubtful houses. All yet seemed quiet and respectable. There was nothing to show anything wrong about the solitary mansions. But the scouts knew something better than that, and were not to be fooled by appearances.

They parted when near the houses, with last words of warning, and each made his way cautiously to this selected goal.

CHAPTER VI.

A GHOST IN THE CHIMNEY.

DARK as the night was it was not blacker than Coal's face as he cautiously made his way toward his chosen house. It did not need much darkness to hide him, for he seemed to cast midnight around him wherever he went.

A few minutes brought him to the vicinity of the house. All was deathly still. Not a movement nor the sound of a voice came from the quiet habitation. Only that he had seen Tom Allen go in there he would have believed it empty and deserted. Not even the gleam of a light came from any of the windows.

A few minutes brought him to the foot of the tree which he had selected as his ladder. It was a large, old buttonwood, the nearest limb being fifteen feet from the ground.

The trunk was several feet through, but it was rough and knobby, and Coal was used to climbing. He went up it like a squirrel, and in a very short time was astride the lowest limb.

The rest of the way was easy. The branches were several feet apart, but he swung himself from one to another, and was quickly on the one that led out over the roof.

Here the boy paused and rested, while he looked and listened with all his eyes and ears. Everything remained quiet. No one had taken the alarm.

After a short rest he began to climb out on the limb. It was thick and strong and grew out several feet above the roof.

Coal looked before him doubtfully. "Ef de ole limb don't bend I'll neber git dere. I'll be 'feard to drap, 'kase my heels mought kick up an luff me slide down."

But the limb did bend. It swayed down when he got to the outer portion of it till it nearly touched the sloping roof.

The climber kept on till he was over the ridge-pole. Then he swung down, holding on with both hands till he had got a firm footing. This done he released his hold of the limb, which shot up again and came to rest just beyond his reach.

"Golly, dis chile's in for't now, dead suah! Can't go back de way I come. Ain't nuffin' but de chimbley."

There was only one thing that troubled Coal's mind. Suppose there was a fire below and the chimney was hot? He had no fancy for being roasted alive, or choked to death with coal gas.

Carefully groping his way he finally reached the top of the wide brick smoke-stack. He put his hand above it. It felt cold, and there was no upward draft of air. Then he stuck his head over and took a sniff. No smell of coal-gas came to his nose.

"Ain't no fire dar, dat's suah," he said, with great satisfaction. "Speck I'll git bracked on, gwine down dat chimbley. But can't git up bracker dan I am now, dat's a suah fact."

He laughed at his own fancy as he lifted himself carefully into the wide mouth of the chimney, taking care to displace no loose bricks. It would not be safe now to have bricks tumbling on the roof.

As we have said Coal had been down chimneys before now, and knew just what he was about. He had spent a year as chimney sweep in his younger days.

Down he went, hand over hand. The flue was so large that it was play for the active boy. It was evident that the house was a very old one. It was built in the days of fire-places, wood fires and broad chimneys.

A few minutes brought him below the level of the upper story. He suddenly paused and listened. The sound of voices came to his ears. A light made its way into the flue below him.

The voices seemed familiar to him. There were the clear tones of a woman and the coarser accents of a man.

"De Laws!" cried Coal, in delight. "Soun's jiss like Missy Clare. An' t'other's dat rascal sport, Tom Allen. Got ter go bery keérful now."

Down he went, noiselessly. The light grew stronger. It seemed to come through an opening in the wall.

He was not long in reaching the point. The opening proved to be a stove-pipe hole that had been made from a second story room into the chimney. This had been afterward papered over, but the paper was broken, and it was through this aperture that the light shone and the voices came.

Coal fixed himself firmly on some projecting ledges of brick and placed his eye at the opening. He was interested in this conversation. Little did the occupants of the room dream of such a spy upon their actions.

The sudden glare of the light blinded him for a moment. When he got used to it he saw that it came from a lamp on the table of a scantily-furnished room.

Near this table sat two persons. They proved to be the ones he expected to see. One of them was his old mistress, Clara Eldon. The other was his late master, Tom Allen.

The delighted boy could not repress a chuckle, so loud that it made Allen sharply lift his head. "What's that?" he asked.

He listened a moment, and then resumed the conversation, every word of which Coal drank in.

"It was only by the most fortunate chance that I discovered where he had taken you, Miss Eldon," said Allen, in a very smooth voice. "A letter dropped by one of his agents set me on the track. The fact is I am in serious danger here

now, for I am surrounded by foes. But what of that? I would risk my life at any time for your safety."

"I am sure you have my deepest gratitude," she warmly answered. "But—it is so base a conspiracy—and after all that has passed—I can hardly believe it."

"At any rate you know you have been seized and brought here, where you are held as a prisoner. Do you know why?"

"I cannot conceive."

"It is because of your wealth, Miss Eldon. It has been done to force money from you. The letter I found revealed that. Will you permit me to tell the whole scheme? It may not prove agreeable to you."

"Go on. I wish to know all."

"It is this, then: Milton Somers wished to win you as a wife. The letter you received, that told you of his former life, blocked his hopes in that direction. As you have told me, he did not dare either to admit or deny."

"He asked me to suspend judgment, and that he would some time make the mystery clear," she murmured.

"Yes, the villain! And this is his way. He lured you by a false letter within his power, and has brought you here, where he intends to hold you for a ransom, or perhaps seek to win your gratitude by coming in at the last moment as your friend. It is providential that I discovered his plot in time."

"Have you that letter?" she asked.

"Unfortunately not with me. But you shall see it. But, Miss Eldon, you must fly from this den at once. I have stolen in here during the absence of the keepers. My carriage is at a safe place outside. There is not a minute to lose. They may return at any moment. We are both in serious danger. Haste, while the chance remains."

"Yes, yes," she cried ardently, springing to her feet. "Let us leave this dreadful den at once! What do I not owe you, Mr. Allen? Who can tell what terrible dangers threaten me here? Yes, let us fly!"

She had seized her bonnet, and was putting it on with trembling hands. Allen had also risen, with an eager manner, and face full of assumed sympathy and hope.

At this instant they were surprised by a most extraordinary occurrence. A voice, coming from they knew not where, sounded through the room.

"Don't ye do 'um, Missy Clare! Don't ye go one step wid dat dar rascal! It am him dat fotched you yere. I knows 'um, de brack-hearted rascal!"

They both started violently, and looked around in surprise and alarm. Where did the voice come from? No living being was in sight. With a suppressed oath Allen ran to the door, flung it open, and looked out. The person he had expected to see was not there. No one was visible.

"Good heavens!" cried Clara, turning deathly pale. "What can it mean? It is the voice of the playmate of my childish days. It is little Sambo's voice. Mercy, is it a warning?"

"It is a trick!" exclaimed Allen, angrily. "Some one is playing a game on us! Let me find him and I will cure him of it! Come, Miss Eldon, don't let that scare you. We must fly at once, ere it is too late."

"Dat'll be from de fryin'-pan into de fire," came the voice again. "It's Marse Allen done it all, Missy Clare. He sent you dem letters an' all. It's him fotched you yere, an' now he wants to fool ye ag'in. Don't ye go one step wid him."

Clara turned paler than before, tottered, and sunk into her chair, her face full of doubt and wonder.

Allen seemed divided between fright and fury. His eyes glared as he looked around him.

"It's that young hound of a Sam Charcoal!" he hissed. "Where is he? Where is he hiding? I'll tear the little wretch limb from limb if I catch him. Ha! What is that?"

He had caught the glitter of an eye in the lamplight. He ran furiously to the hole in the wall.

"In here! In the chimney, as I'm a sinner!" he shouted, furiously. "Don't be scared, Miss Eldon, I'll have the rascal yet. I'll cure him of playing tricks on me."

He ran to the door and plunged furiously out. In a moment she could hear him descending the stairs.

She continued seated with a strange look in her eyes. The words she had heard had roused a new suspicion.

Was it correct? Was Allen the villain who had brought her here, and was now seeking to

carry out his plot? She began to believe. His freedom in entering her prison and his present fury, looked suspicious. She sat with her face buried in her hands, listening to his rapid descent.

All at once a thought came to her. Her prison door was open. She might escape without aid. She rose hastily and hurried from the room.

Meanwhile Allen had gained the ground floor of the house, and had rushed hastily back to the kitchen where he knew the chimney ended in a broad fireplace.

He fully expected to find here the boy whose voice had given him his late scare. But no trace of Coal was visible. There had been no time for him to escape further. He must still be in the chimney.

Allen seized a lamp and held it in the fireplace, looking up the chimney as far as possible. But no living thing was visible.

Then, with a savage oath, he seized a bundle of paper and a handful of kindling. This he thrust into the hearth, and set fire to it with a match.

"I'll bring him down or smother him, blast his young picture!" he hissed. "I'm afraid he has played hob with my plans."

The fire blazed up furiously, sending its blaze far up the chimney. He heaped on another handful of paper and awaited results, expecting to see Coal tumble like a singed swallow to the hearth.

But he waited in vain. Nothing came down the chimney, though no living being could have endured that fierce blaze.

Another thought coming to him, Allen rushed out of doors and gazed up to the roof, with the idea that his expected victim had escaped that way.

But he looked in vain. No one was on the roof. And now, for the first time, a superstitious dread came into his mind. He began to fear that it was really something supernatural that had given him his fright.

The boy had been left locked in the garret-room at the town-house. Had he died there, and was this his ghost come to haunt his murderers? The frightened villain pressed both hands to his head, and staggered with alarm. A sudden terror had come upon his ruthless soul.

From this momentary stupor he was roused by a hand on his arm and a voice in his ear:

"What have you been doing?" came in harsh tones. "You have left everything open. Your prisoner has escaped, and is flying down the road."

A fierce oath came from the startled villain's lips as he recovered his wits.

"After her at once! She must not escape! On your life, bring her back! Not one red penny will you get if she gives you the slip!"

In a moment more there was swift pursuit of the flying woman, who had seized the fortunate minute to escape.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW BOB WORKED HIS WIRES.

BUT we must leave Coal in the chimney or wherever he was, and the flying fugitive on the road, and follow our other young scout, in his enterprise, at the other house.

It will be remembered that while Coal had chosen the chimney as his avenue of entrance, Bob had selected the cellar window. He had no fancy for breaking his neck by roof-climbing.

On reaching the house it did not prove to be as lifeless as he had thought. Listening for a few minutes at a window he heard voices within.

Bob had some idea of trying to enter at one of these lower windows, but on hearing these voices he went back to his original plan.

The cellar window was closed by a wire screen. After fumbling for a minute in the darkness he found that this screen was unbolted, and came easily out. Pulling it aside there yawned before him a narrow, dark aperture, that looked wide enough to let him through, with a tight squeeze.

Bob was not the boy to waste time in making up his mind. In an instant he had his legs through the opening. He let himself down cautiously, inch by inch. It was, as he had feared, a tight fit. There was some hard scraping to get his shoulders through. In a few minutes, however, the task was safely done, and he was standing on a box that fortunately lay under the window, within reach of his feet.

"Mighty lucky I put on my old clothes," he muttered. "Don't mind much tearin' this jacket, but I wouldn't had my Sunday-go-to-meetin' torn fur nothin'. But, oh, my! ain't it blazin' dark here! 'Nough to set a chap's teeth on edge."

The Daisy Detectives.

He listened for a minute. No sounds came to him here. He groped his way to the cellar floor, and out to the middle of the inclosure, taking great care to upset or stumble over no obstruction.

"Got ter strike a match and see how things lay, or I'll never get out o' this here place," he declared.

The next moment the light of a match flashed through the dark space.

Bob gazed hastily all around him, for fear of discovery. But he quickly saw that he was alone. Reassured by this he examined the place which he had entered more closely.

The cellar was of a square shape, with several walled-off niches, and an abundance of lumber and rubbish on its floor. The stairs from it led upward on the left side. But he was not ready to try these stairs yet. He might have to find his way back to the cellar in a hurry, and wanted to see what chances it offered for hiding in case of danger.

Lighting another match the cautious boy went around the inclosure. None of the several compartments offered any safe hiding-place. The only promising spot he saw was an opening in one corner, just visible over a heap of boxes.

There seemed here a recess in the wall, as if it had not been built as high as the remainder of the wall. This left an opening of a little more than a foot wide, and two or three feet long, just under the house floor. Thrusting his match in he could see that the space was of some depth, and closed with a broad board inside.

"A feller mought crawl in there if he was hunted close," muttered Bob. "But fur all that 'tain't very 'viting; and I've seen places I'd sooner bunk in. You bet I keep clear on't 'cept I'm driv. Guess now I'll 'vestigate the upper stories."

It was a risky task he had now before him. The cellar stairs creaked under his tread in a way that made him shiver. Yet he went resolutely on, step by step.

Reaching the door, he found it on the latch, and pushed it slowly open. It proved to be not quite as dark as he had feared. A faint light from some distant lamp or candle made the hall before him just visible.

The stairs opened into a passageway that ran the length of the house. The light came from a room to the left, whose door was a crack open. As he stood watching, the sound of voices came to him from this room.

He crept slowly forward, with a noiseless step, till near the door. There might be something said it would be useful for him to hear.

He paused at the foot of the stairs that led upward. The words could be easily made out now. The voices were those of men, loud and hoarse.

"I wish the business was well through," said one. "It's tiresome and dangerous."

"And don't pay well enough for a big risk," said a second.

"Don't believe, though, there's much risk. The chap up-stairs is safe enough, and we keep everything so quiet that we're not likely to have visitors."

"It's lucky there's them tight back rooms. Just got up for a job like this. Say, Joe, where's the boss?"

"Up-stairs somewhere. Don't know just what he's about."

"Can't say as I care much."

They continued their conversation, but nothing more of interest came to the listener's ears. But he had heard enough to give him some interesting points. He was sure now that Mr. Somers was a prisoner in that house, and had some idea of the room in which he would find him. Who knew but he might aid him to escape?

With very little hesitation Bob began to go up-stairs. He set his feet slowly and easily, trying to keep down the alarming creaking that came from the dry boards.

No one took the alarm, however, and he was soon at the head of the stairs. Here also was a passageway running across the house. Several rooms opened into it. Bob looked around him. A faint light came down from the floor above. But no one seemed to be on the floor he now occupied.

He walked carefully forward, trying the doors of the various rooms. The most of them yielded to his touch, opening into empty apartments. But one in the rear of the house failed to yield. It was a strong oaken door, with no sign of a key in the lock. Bob tried it again.

"Who's there?" came a voice from within, that made the boy's heart jump in his breast.

It was the voice of the man he sought.

Bob knelt and put his lips to the keyhole.

"Speak low," he said. "It's me, Bob Buttermilk. Ain't it Mr. Somers in there?"

"Yes."

"Locked in tight? Salted down in quod, and all that?"

"I'm held here a prisoner," came the answer. "Who are you? I don't recognize your name. Are you a friend?"

"I'm on the scout, huntin' you up. I'm only a boy, Mr. Somers, but I'm a hummer. I'm goin' to git you out o' this place or bu'st. But I dunno jist how to work it."

"I do not know you, my boy, but you have an honest voice. Bring some one here to help you. Inform the authorities. An officer will soon open that door."

The captive's voice was full of hope.

"They won't b'lieve me," answered Bob. "A ragged boy like me'll only git kicked out."

"Wait. I'll give you a letter describing my condition. Keep quiet for a minute."

Bob waited. He could think of no better plan than that proposed by the prisoner.

A few minutes passed. Then a white object was thrust out under the door.

"Take that. Be quick and wary. Bring help as soon as you can."

"You kin bet on that."

Bob picked up the letter and rose to his feet. But to his surprise and dismay at that moment a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and a harsh voice spoke in his ear:

"I think I'll take that document, youngster. I fancy you've put your pigeon in the wrong pie."

The surprised boy squirmed round and looked up into the face of his captor. He recognized it at a glance. It was the stern countenance of Harry Slowby.

"You're in for it, you young hound. By the Lord, I'll salt you for this!"

"Bet you don't," cried Bob.

He gave a quick dive. Fortunately his shirt was old and rotten. It ripped out, leaving a handful in Slowby's hand. Then with a jerk against his legs that sent the captor reeling against the door, the alert boy was away at full speed.

"Good-by, old Slowfoot," he called back. "Bet you don't git no persimmons off this tree."

With an oath the villain was after him. Bob made for the stairs, down which he shot at 2:40 speed. Slowby followed, yelling out to warn the men in the room below.

Bob could hear them start and rush to the door. He reached the foot of the stairs just as they came tumbling out into the passage.

The fugitive knew but one way out of that house, and he made for the cellar with all speed. He had reached the foot of the cellar stairs when he heard his pursuers stumbling and cursing at the top.

Thoughts ran like lightning through the boy's quick brain. What was to be done?

"It'll take a squeeze to git through that cellar winder," he thought. "They'll grab my heels 'fore my head gits out. Guess I'll dig fur the hole back here, and trust to luck."

He remembered the lay of the land well enough to reach the desired point without difficulty. Climbing over the pile of wood he pushed his head into the cavity. It was wide enough to let him in easily, and in a very short time he was entirely concealed, resting against the board that formed its rear portion.

The men were now in the cellar, cursing and stumbling about.

"Why the blazes didn't you bring a light, Jim?"

"Forgot one. Ain't you got a match?"

"Nary match. Run back for the lamp."

"Never mind. Here's Mr. Slowby with a light."

The glare of a lamp now flashed through the cellar. The conversation continued.

"Ain't no sign of the young rat. Reckon he's squirmed out that winder."

"He hasn't had time," declared Slowby.

"The screen's down, anyhow. And he's a spry youngster. Where did he come from?"

"Where is he gone to? is the point now. Run up-stairs, Jim, and look outside. We'll search the cellar."

Every word of this conversation came to the ears of the boy as he lay crouched close in his hiding-place. He could hear one man ascending the stairs, while the others began to overturn boxes in their search.

Bob trembled. He could not hope that this place would escape the searchers. And there was no telling what they might do to him if they should catch him.

In his fright he pushed back hard against the

board behind him. Suddenly it gave way, dropped down flat, and he rolled back into an open space behind it. The board, relieved of his weight, sprung upright again, as if forced up by a spring.

This had not taken place without some noise, but just then the searchers of the cellar were overturning a pile of boxes, and the noise they made drowned that made by Bob.

If ever there was a surprised boy it was Bob Buttermilk at that moment. He could scarcely imagine what had happened to him, it had all come so quickly.

He reached upward as he lay on his back. He was certainly in a more roomy space than before. He could just touch its roof with his hands.

Twisting round, he stretched his hands out in every direction. He could feel walls of earth or brick on each side, but in front there seemed an open space. He crawled carefully forward. The space continued open. He seemed to be in a passage leading into the earth.

After he had gone a short distance he ventured to try and stand up. He found that the roof had risen, and he could easily walk. It was a narrow avenue, about three feet wide and six high, leading straight forward.

ASTOUNDED by his discovery the boy pushed on, with a wild hope of some surprising adventure. Yet the darkness was terrible, and he felt carefully with each step, for fear of falling headlong into some abyss.

Bob's heart throbbed painfully, as he went on step by step. What distance he had gone he could not imagine. Every foot seemed a rod in his excited state.

He suddenly stopped. He had heard a strange sound before him, a sort of groan. He threw out both arms, but they met only vacancy. The walls he had so far felt had suddenly disappeared. He was utterly lost in unknown space.

The sound was repeated. Bob's heart throbbed painfully, and his hair stood upright. What frightful danger was before him? He was not easily scared, but he feared there might be some terrible monster here, ready to destroy him.

He still had some matches in his pocket, which he had so far forgotten. Now, determined to brave the worst, he drew one of these forth and struck it on the sole of his shoe.

As the light flashed forth a shuddering cry came from the space before him. Then his startled eyes beheld a face as black as a coal, with great staring eyes glaring upon him.

Out went the match, and darkness again enshrouded the scared adventurer.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW COAL GOT OUT.

THAT the young scout was badly scared need not be said. He imagined he had seen something supernatural, and shuddered at the thought of that terrible black hobgoblin which had broken on him through the darkness.

As it proved, however, the scare was not all on his side. There came a familiar voice to his ears that trembled with fright.

"Fore de blessed marcy, what dat?"

"Shoot me fur a 'tater-parer, if 'tain't that black imp, Sam Charcoal!"

"Golly! but I b'lieb it am dat white trash, Bob Buttermilk."

The light of another match flashed out, flinging its clear rays through that strange underground region.

There stood the two boyish partners, facing each other, and not right sure yet but what they were looking on something supernatural.

"Blame me if it ain't that ugly nig arter all."

"It am dat white trash, for suah!"

"How the blazes did you get here, Coal?"

"Whar de blessed saints did you come from, Bob?"

"It's jist the rummest go as I ever hearn tell on. But s'pose we take a squint round these diggin's fu'st. Time 'nough to talk arter the light's fized out."

"Jiss what I were gwine to purpose," answered Coal.

Ceasing their conversation they looked with wondering eyes around them. They found themselves in a sort of vaulted chamber, of some ten feet diameter, and about eight feet high. Its sides and arched roof were made of brick-work, and the walls seemed everywhere solid except on the opposite sides, where two narrow avenues seemed to lead outward.

Bob recognized one of these as the one by which he had come. He pointed to the other.

"How did you git here, Coal? Come that way?"

"Speck so. Dunno much 'bout it, 'cept I'm yere. Say, Bob, what's dat?"

He pointed to an object that lay on the floor near the side wall. It was of casket shape, of about ten inches in length, with brass mountings that had become deep green with age.

"Lawsee, that's queer," ejaculated Bob. "Wonder if it's full o' gold or di'monds! Maybe we're in luck, arter all."

He made a hasty step toward the casket. But just then his match went out, leaving them again in total darkness.

Bob felt in his pocket. He only had one left. It might be necessary to keep that for some emergency.

"Guess that box o' diamonds won't run away," he said, resignedly. "Looks as if it'd been there a hundred years now. It'll wait a bit longer, while we squat down and have a confab. Tell you what it is, Coal, we're in a sort o' tight place."

"Dat's 'bout what I was t'inkin'."

"What do you think this place was made for?"

"Don't t'ink nuffin' 'bout it."

"Well, I do. These are old houses, built afore the Revolution. Them was hard times, Coal, and folks had to hide sometimes. I calculate this place had been dug fur a hidin'-place from the Britishers. I've a notion the folks as lived here had to skeet for it, with their box of gold and diamonds. They've put it here to hide, and never come back ag'in. We're the fu'st that's been here since."

"How you know it am gold an' diamonds?"

"Jist by guessin'."

"Guess you don't know nuffin' 'bout it. 'Speck we bess talk 'bout sumfin' we knows."

"Maybe we had." Squat down, you thick-headed old ducky, and let's have a gabble. Where the blazes did you come from, that's what I want to know?"

Coal, before answering, seated himself against the wall of the inclosure. He wanted to feel something solid behind him. Bob dropped down in the middle of the floor.

"Pitch in now," he said. "Let's hear what you've picked up."

Thus requested, Coal began the story of his adventures. With the most of them the reader is already familiar, and his account need not be repeated. We will only take up the thread of his narrative at the point where we lost sight of him in a previous chapter.

"When dat Tom Allen run down-stairs, cussin' like a lokymotive, you bess b'lieb dis ducky were a bit skeered," remarked Coal. "I slid down the chimbley, but I weren't fast 'nough. For he was in de kitchen, a-cussin' an' a-swearin' dat he build a fire an' roast de brack imp out. Den I 'gin to git skeered, Bob. Looked 's if it were all up wid de nig."

"How the blazes did you get away?"

"Heered him strike de match. Den de blaze cum a-shootin' up de chimbley. Whew! Fuzz! didn't it git scorchin' hot! Warned to climb up ag'in, but I knowed I couldn't do it."

"You didn't drap down?"

"Nary time. Dat dar blazin' paper brung me yere, Bob, an' nuffin' shorter. I were lookin' 'round, jiss like a fly in a spider-web, when I see'd a big hole in de chimbley. I were moss scorched den, and my wool was 'ginnin' to friz up wid de heat, so I luff myself drop like a singed rat inter dat hole."

"Guess it was 'bout time," broke in Bob. "Must ha' been squally quarters, round them diggin's."

"Dat's how I come yere. De hole in de chimbley went down perpendicular. Dar were a board at de bottom, but dis nig come down so sudden dat de board busted, and he got spilled out in de passage. Den I come creepin' 'long, mighty keerful, fur suab. De fuss ting I knowed I heered sumfin' queer. Den I got skeered, fur I t'out I were in among de ghosts. Who'd eber t'out dat der ghost were on'y Bob Buttermilk? Dat's all, anyhow, Bob. Dat's how I cum yere."

"So you found Miss Clara; and Tom Allen was tryin' to 'tice her to run away? Got to put a spoke in that wheel, Coal."

"Now I want to hear how you cum yere. Weren't you skeered too?"

"Skeered? Me skeered? Oh, come now! Guess you never see'd me let on."

"Queer kind o' lettin' on. Dat's my 'pinion."

"Well, this is how I got here," said Bob, who thought it wise to change the subject. "Arter I left you on the fence rail—"

But we will not repeat his story, as the reader is already familiar with it. That the boys felt

themselves to be heroes of the first water was very natural. They certainly had been very fortunate so far, and had made a discovery which might prove of the greatest advantage to them in their future efforts.

"Them folks in the house don't know nothin' 'bout this hidin'-place, that's certain," said Bob. "If they did, that box o' diamonds wouldn't be left here."

"How you know it's di'mon's?" demanded the incredulous ducky.

"If you say that ag'in, Sam Charcoal, I'll stuff some o' them di'monds down your throat. I never saw a nigger as was so hard to make believe."

"Don't b'lieb dere's no di'mon's dar."

"Well, jist let that slide. Wait till every body's asleep, and then we'll slip back into the houses and try to git them pris'ners off. Guess that's 'bout the programme."

"Golly, but you's got sense dar anyhow; if you ain't got any 'bout de di'mon's."

Coal laughed and kicked up his heels as he spoke. As he did so he pressed back strongly against the wall that supported him. Suddenly there came a crackling sound, and everything seemed to be giving way behind him. He felt himself to be tumbling out into vacancy, and sinking, as it seemed to his frightened wits, into an abyss of miles in depth.

Bob was almost as much scared as his companion by this sudden occurrence. What had happened he could not imagine. He took a hasty step forward, and found himself stepping into vacancy. Only by hastily catching the wall he saved himself from following his comrade.

A groan came up to his ears from some depths below. He listened intently.

"Where are you, Coal?" he asked. "What has happened?"

"De good Laws knows." The voice seemed to Bob to come from a mile below him, it was so deep and hollow. "Reckon I'm clane done fur. Know I dropped six mile. Jiss you put a tombstone ober poor Coal, kase dis ain be last ob him."

By this time Bob began to think that Coal didn't talk like a dead man, and his voice seemed to come nearer. He remembered that he had one match left. And fortunately there was a piece of a newspaper in his pocket. He twisted this up in the shape of a torch, struck his last match and touched it to the paper. In a moment the latter kindled and blazed up, the light illuminating the whole scene around him.

What he saw was utterly unexpected. On the side of the vault against which Coal had leaned was a yawning opening, leading down into a dark abyss.

Holding the torch to the opening and looking down, he saw below him a sloping avenue, cut through the earth and extending some twenty or thirty feet downward. At the bottom of it lay Coal, doubled up into a ball, and still groaning.

Looking closer, Bob saw that the wall had not given way, as he had at first fancied. The opening was of the shape of a doorway, and he could see that a door was swinging outward. It had evidently been painted to imitate brickwork, and been intended as a secret door, closed by a spring. The spring had probably rusted out with time, and had suddenly given way before the pressure brought upon it.

"All this ain't been got up for fun," thought Bob. "That passageway means something, and I'm goin' to find out what, 'fore this light gives out."

His paper torch was not yet half burned. He stepped carefully out into the sloping passage, down which Coal had rolled. He pushed the door to behind him, for fear of pursuit. It closed with a sharp clink. The spring was still in working order.

Then he felt his way down the passage. It was very steep, but by care he managed to get to the bottom without slipping.

There Coal still lay. Bob stirred him with his foot.

"Git up," he cried. "You ain't dead. You're only skeered."

"Coal won't neber breave de breff o' life ag'in. I'm clane gone dead. Ain't nuffin' leff fur me but a fun'ral."

"We'll see 'bout that."

Bob knelt and applied the last remnant of his torch to Coal's ear.

The touch of the blaze had a remarkable effect on the dying boy. He clapped his hand to his ear, let out a wild yell on feeling the scorching blaze on his fingers, and leaped to his feet and sprung headlong forward.

A laugh broke from Bob's lips as he let fall the last remnant of his torch. He could hear a

crashing of bushes ahead. Then there came a loud splash, as if Coal had tumbled headlong into a pool of water.

"Got smashed first, and now he's goin' to git drowned," muttered Bob, as he hurried anxiously forward.

Where he was going he had no idea. But he found the aperture growing so narrow that he could just squeeze through. Then he came into a thick clump of bushes. There was a change from the close air he had been breathing, and the faint light of the open night surrounded him.

A few steps more and he was through the bushes. To his utter surprise there spread before him a broad sheet of flowing water, in whose surface the stars of the night shone reflected.

He had emerged from the secret passage to the banks of the Schuylkill.

It was at a point well adapted to conceal the passage, for on each side a ridge of rocks came sheer down to the river, rendering the spot impassable. It could be reached only by a boat.

But what first attracted his attention was the form of his comrade, who was wildly floundering in the stream, into which he had blindly plunged.

"Guess Coal's all right," said Bob, easily. "Couldn't no more drown that little nig than you could drown an empty bottle. Hello, pard; ain't dead yet, are ye?"

"Moss. Not quite dis time."

"Then streak out a bit. There's a boat floatin' there, jist round the turn. Fotch it up here, and we'll take a row out o' these diggin's."

Bob spoke cautiously. Ears might be within hearing. Coal, to whom the plunge in the cold water had brought back his senses, struck out lustily for the floating boat.

Climbing into it he pulled up the anchor, which was but a stone attached to a rope and flung overboard. Luckily there was a pair of oars in the boat, and in a few minutes he had rowed it to where Bob was waiting on the shore.

The latter stepped quickly aboard.

"Now push her out and let her drift," he cautiously remarked. "And keep mum. There mought be ears not fur off. Wouldn't be comfable to have a pistol-bullet comin' arter us."

Down the dark stream floated the two young adventurers, through the shadowy night, heeding not where the flowing stream might take them.

CHAPTER IX.

A PLOT AND ITS WORKINGS.

IN a third-floor room of the house in which Milton Somers was held prisoner sat the two villains who had organized the base plot which has but partly revealed itself.

We must listen awhile to their conversation, as they are talking on a subject which it is necessary for the reader to understand.

"Confound it all, Tom," declared Harry Slowby. "We ought never to have let those two young hounds escape our clutches. They may raise the very old sin about us yet."

"I don't fear them," answered Tom, confidently. "There's one thing about boys. They want the credit of doing things themselves. 'You'll find they won't give information. They will buzz round here like moths round a candle. And the first thing they know they'll get their wings burnt."

"I hope so. They come near playing the deuce with us. Only that Joe was a good runner, our lady prisoner would have given us the slip completely."

"Is she safe now?"

"As safe as lock, key and bars can make her."

"I played my trump card with her," remarked Tom, "and would have won but for that dashed nigger. What the blazes became of him gets me. He must have got out of the chimney before I reached it, or he would have been scorched out."

"It was the same with my boy. He gave me the slip in some confounded way."

"They are not far off. Joe and Jack will nab them yet, I fancy. I have set them both on the lookout."

They continued their conversation for some time. They were, in fact, more anxious than they let appear. It was no safe game they were playing, and if the authorities should once get wind of their scheme it might prove a serious business for them.

"Does the marriage project still hold?" asked Harry.

"No. I showed my hand too strongly when

that boy startled me. I can see she distrusts me. That plan will have to be given up."

"But isn't that giving everything up? How do you expect to handle the money unless you marry the woman?"

"Sit still and I will tell you," answered Tom, lighting a cigar as he spoke. "I've got more arrows than one in my quiver. I can promise you that."

He puffed at his cigar till he had got it well lighted.

"It isn't the woman I want; it is the money. You know that, Harry."

"I thought you were marrying her for that."

"That would not give me her money under the confounded laws of Pennsylvania. I must have another claim than that. And so I have."

"Ha! What is that claim? That is something new."

"Something old, you mean," answered Tom. "I am going to let you into a trifle of a secret, for I will want your help to carry out my plans, and I think I can count on you."

"If you pay for it."

"Just so. Well, Harry, the state of the case is this. Clara Eldon's property is not as clear as she fancies. There is an old claim on the estate that has never been set aside, a claim a hundred years old. You don't know how I came to own these two houses, on the banks of the Schuylkill?"

"No—I have been puzzled to understand that."

"They have been in my family for more than a century. During the Revolutionary war they were occupied by John Amos and Frederick Barrington, first cousins of my great grandfather. Amos was the owner of both properties, and of a considerable estate about here. Both he and Barrington were killed by a Tory scouting party, during the war, and their houses ransacked. After the war the papers relating to the property were sought for, but no trace of them could be found. They had completely disappeared, and were probably destroyed by the Tories. It is on that I base my claim to the Eldon estate. If those papers were in existence Clara Eldon's claim would be indisputable. As it turned out her grandfather, as next of kin, took quiet possession of the property. My grandfather had really an equal right, but he was in Europe, and he never pressed his claim on his return. He belonged to the Tories, and it was safest for him to keep silent."

"I see. It is growing interesting."

"I have a full account of all the family connections since. Milton Somers is a descendant, and if he knew it, has an equal claim to the property with Clara Eldon. That I do not intend to tell him."

"And you?"

"My claim is not so good as theirs. I could not sustain it unless they signed a renunciation of their claims."

"Which they never will."

"Don't be too sure of that."

"You have a plan laid, then?"

"Yes. I intend to let them out of prison on one condition. That is that they sign a release of all claim to the reversion of the estate of John Amos. There will be no trouble to get them to sign those papers, for they will think it of no value. Neither of them ever heard of John Amos."

"Shall we let them go then?"

"Yes. But not at once. They must be held till I get the papers fairly in court, and certain necessary steps taken. After a few days I don't care what they do. Give me their signatures and a week's start, and the estate is mine."

"And the papers to be signed?"

"They are here. I am not traveling without my documents. See here, Harry. You must get the fair Clara to sign this paper, under any promise you please. I will manage that Somers signs the other. And then we go back on our promises, turn the keys on them again, and hey for our fortunes."

He produced, as he spoke, two legal-looking documents, one of which he gave to his companion.

"It is your business to get the lady's name to the bottom of that paper. See you don't fail. You are as welcome to do as much lying as you please."

"But how about witnesses? They may deny the signatures."

"Joe and Jack will witness. They are true blue."

"It's a very neat game as it stands," remarked Harry. "Yet it seems to me I can see one hole in your ladder."

"What is that?"

"You talk of setting our prisoners free. Suppose they go for us, which they will be sure to."

Suppose they claim abduction and imprisonment, and that their signatures were got by force or fraud. They may make things hot for us. I don't like this letting them go."

"I don't care that for them," and Tom contemptuously snapped his fingers. "If they tell such a story we'll laugh at it as a cock-and-bull yarn, and defy them to prove it. How will they do that? We'll swear they want to go back on their signatures. Joe and Jack will follow our lead in everything. I tell you, Harry, we've got the game in our own hands."

"I am not so sure," said Harry, anxiously. "How about those boys? Confound the young rascals, I'd like to have a chance to wring their necks."

"That's what we must do," answered Tom. "If we get hold of them we must not let go again. Two vagrants like them will never be missed."

"Can we trust our men to settle for them?"

"Yes. Joe Prince would choke his own grandmother for money. And Jack Brace cares no more for a boy's squeal than for a stuck porker's."

"Then let's strike while the iron's hot. We must have those signatures."

A few words more of conversation and the villains parted, having freely laid their plan of procedure.

The conversation here recorded took place on the afternoon of the day after the escape of the boys.

What meanwhile had become of these young adventurers, whom we last saw in a boat on the river, floating down toward the city?

The pair of villains who were serving as jailers to the prisoners had been on the lookout since early morning for the escaped boys. They were wide-awake, shrewd fellows, and the chances would have been slim for Bob and Coal had they shown themselves within sight of the house. Every point was watched by these sharp spies. Not a movement of grass or tree escaped their eyes. Keen as the boys were they had as keen a pair of men to deal with.

Yet there was one thing that the lookouts did not dream of. They were watching the outside only. They did not fancy it necessary to watch the inside of the house. They felt sure that no one could enter without coming under their eyes.

Yet despite their sharpness the boys had the best of them. While bush and tree and grass and road were being closely watched they had stolen back into the house by the secret way they had discovered the night before, and were closely concealed, Coal in his chimney, and Bob in his cellar, waiting for opportunities to set free the prisoners.

And when the main pair of villains sought the rooms in which their prisoners were confined, in order to get their signatures to the papers, they little dreamed that their every movement was watched by youthful eyes.

Coal found lookout holes in his chimney, through which he managed to follow the movements of Harry Slowboy. Bob had stolen up from the cellar, and hidden himself in one of the lower rooms of the house, from which he watched the movements of Tom Allen.

He was hidden in a closet when Allen entered the room which he occupied. There was an air of great satisfaction on the villain's face, as Bob managed to see through the key-hole of the closet door.

"By Jove!" muttered Tom, to himself, "that was neatly done. I only hope Harry will have as easy luck with the girl. Why, the confounded fool signed with hardly a question. He knew no more who John Amos was than he knew the man in the moon, and he signed away a fortune as if he was signing an order for dinner. I promised to let him out, it is true. So I will, when it is safe. If he had been wise he would have got out first and signed afterward."

He laughed as he hung up a key on a nail in the wall.

"I hardly think he will get out of prison till Joe Prime is ready to turn the key in the lock for him, and that will not be till I have got this affair in proper shape. If Harry has as good luck our game's made."

He turned and left the room. Hardly had he done so ere the door opened a crack, and a pair of sharp young eyes were fixed on the key.

"Lawsee!" cried Bob, with a low laugh, "if this ain't prime, then I don't know nothin' 'bout pickled oysters! Dunno what that paper is, but ther's one thing sure. He's sold his game inter my hands."

As for the operations of the other confederate they were watched as closely by Coal from his chimney lookout.

He saw the villain in the prison-room of Clara

Eldon, heard his promises of freedom if she would sign a paper clearing him of all responsibility for the imprisonment, and saw her sign it without reading.

Coal was strongly tempted to play the ghost again, as he had done before. But Bob had sternly cautioned him not to speak, and he managed, with some difficulty, to hold his tongue.

Harry Slowby took the signed paper, carefully folded it, and placed it in the pocket of his coat.

"I am free, then?" she anxiously asked.

"Yes. I am a man of my word, Miss Eldon. But not just now. I will have a carriage here in an hour to take you back to the city."

"Oh, sir, you are deceiving me!" She started hastily up. "I must leave this place! At once! On the instant! I have your word!"

"My word will be kept. But we don't do things in that hasty way here. You must wait till I get things ready."

She ran forward, but too late. He had slipped from the room, shut the door, and turned the key.

"Not so fast," came his mocking voice. "You must bide my time."

His steps could be heard as he walked away.

"Good Heaven, he has deceived me! Idiot that I was! What paper was that I signed? Has he cheated me in that, too?"

She staggered back and fell helplessly into her chair, but started hastily up again as a familiar voice came to her ears.

"Don't 'ee git skeered, Missy Clare. Jiss you 'pend on Coal. Dat nig's about; and he's gwine to git you out o' dat place, suah."

CHAPTER X.

THAT BOX OF "DI'MON'S."

LITTLE did the villains dream of what was going on inside of their seemingly secure dens. Getting the signatures of their pair of aids to the papers, as witnesses, they prepared to leave for the city.

"We will leave you in charge," said Allen. "We will be back to-morrow, but have some important business to attend to in the city. See that your prisoners do not escape. And keep up your watch for those young hounds. They will be smelling around here as soon as it grows dark. If you nab them see that they don't escape. You understand?"

He gave a meaning wink.

"Ay, ay!" answered Joe, gruffly. "If I get my hands on one of the young rats I bet I pinch him till he squeals."

"And if I nab the other I'll snip his tail off close up to his ears," broke in Jack.

"No violence," said Harry. "But they are not to trouble us again."

There was a murderous meaning in the look he gave.

In a few minutes more they were in their carriage, driving rapidly off toward the city. The ruffians they left behind stationed themselves grimly again on guard.

"I don't know what come of them boys last night," said Joe to his comrade. "They aren't quite smoke, to fade out o' sight. There always has been something queer about these houses. There used to be a story of secret passages, that were used in the Revolution."

"And you think the boys got into them?"

"It looks shocking queer, anyhow."

"The chap we chased to the cellar didn't go through that window, I'll swear to that. I've a notion we'd better watch inside as well as outside."

"Tain't a bad notion, nohow."

They parted with these words, each going to his respective house.

Meanwhile the boys had not been idle. They were back again in the secret chamber, which they fancied much the safest hiding-place just then.

But it was not the dark chamber of the night before. They had taken care to provide themselves with candles and matches during the day, and the vaulted apartment was now lit up with a pair of candles, set in niches in the wall.

They had also been thoughtful enough to lay in a stock of food. Bob had spread his coat on the floor, and the materials for a plentiful lunch were laid upon it. To this food the hungry lads were paying their hearty respects.

Coal's eyes shone with satisfaction as he gnawed away at a knuckle of ham.

"By gum, but dat am good!" he declared. "Neber tasted nuffin' half so sweet. Golly, Bob, ain't we fooled dem dar rascals nice?"

"Kinder reckon so," answered Bob, dryly, as he went for his share of the lunch. "So you had a confab with Miss Clara?"

"Yes, siree, boss-fly. She ain't no fool, nary time. Got 'um all laid out, Bob. Gwine to fotch her out o' dat place, arter dark."

"Can you work it? Where are you goin' to git the key?"

"Don't want no key. Got a better way dan dat."

"Let it out then. What's your plan?"

"Gwine up de chimbley, dis chap am. Dar's an ole fireplace in Missy Clare's room. It am all boarded up, but dat ain't nuffin' to me. Kin kick dat out. Den I'm gwine to fotch her down de chimbley, an' bring her 'long yere. How's dat fur good, Bob?"

"Mighty prime," answered Bob. "Ain't got nothin' half so slick my side the house. But if that blind rooster didn't hang up the key right afore my eyes ther's no snakes. He didn't twig no coon 'bout my size in the closet, you bet. I'm goin' to slick Mr. Somers down the cellar my side, and put him in the secret passage."

"See yere, Bob. Dem dar chiles am in lub wid one another."

"They jist go together like 'taters and gravy."

"Den we got ter hole back, an' luff 'em meet unbeknownst."

"Jolly fur you, Coal. That's a good ideer. Don't let the cat out o' the bag. Spose they won't skeer one another like we did. Leave the candles burnin', so's they kin see the'r faces."

"Golly, but dat's good! You stay back your side, an' I'll stay back mine, till arter de lub-makin's ober. Den we'll come in an' tote 'em down ter de boat."

"Mighty good ideer, Coal. Didn't know you had so much brains under yer black wool. Know what I'm goin' to do now?"

"Neber know what you're gwine ter do," answered Coal, with dignity. "Ain't no 'pendence on you, whatsomdever."

"Why, I'm goin' fur them di'monds. You cheated me out o' them afore, by tumblin' down-hill. Can't do it this time."

"Don't b'lieb' dar's no di'mon's dar," answered Coal. "Can't fool dis nig wid yer ole boxes."

"Here goes anyhow."

Bob drew the box toward him. It was very heavy, and the wood seemed moldy and rotten with age. It had been originally a handsome mahogany box, with chased brass mountings.

The lock still held. After a pull or two, however, the hinges gave way in the rotten wood, and the lid flew open. Despite Coal's disdain of the diamond theory, he could not keep his eyes off the box. He was really as curious as Bob about its contents.

What they saw, however, was not the expected gold or jewels, but some papers or parchment, yellow with age, and the writing upon them so faded as to be hardly visible.

"Poh! Only a lot of old paper," cried Bob, disdainfully.

"Tote you dere weren't no di'mon's," declared the triumphant dinky.

"Dunno what made the box so heavy."

Bob snatched the papers, and threw them out on the floor. Then they both opened their eyes to their full width. For there before them lay a heap of yellow coins, discolored with age, which had been covered by the layer of papers.

Bob thrust his hand into the heap, lifted up a handful, and let them fall back with a ringing clang.

"Gold, or I don't know a pig's foot from a mackerel," he cried, delightedly. "You knowed all 'bout it, didn't you? You're a smart coon, Sam Charcoal."

"Bet dar ain't no di'mon's, anyhow," muttered Coal, feasting his eyes hungrily on the shining coin that Bob had revealed.

"Don't you be too sure o' that," said Bob, who was getting a little tired of Coal's persistence about the diamonds. "Jist wait till we git to the bottom."

He picked the box up and overturned it on the floor. Out came the contents in a heap of shining gold. The discolored coins had been all on top. Those below were bright as if just from the mint.

And from the very bottom of the box there rolled out a small metal case, with a peculiar clang. This Bob snatched up with a look of triumph.

He wrenched open the cover, that held stiffly to its place.

Instantly there came a flash to their eyes, as the light of the candles penetrated the box.

"Now who knows 'bout di'monds?" cried Bob, as he thrust his hand into the box and pulled out a long necklace, that glittered with precious stones.

Coal had no more to say. He was silenced by the shining light that dazzled his eyes.

"Look at 'em! White and red and blue! Big as hazel-nuts, some on 'em. 'Nough there to buy a farm and a baker's dozen o' cows."

"Dem's on'y pebble-stones," cried Coal. "Pick up plenty o' dem 'long de ribber. Ain't no di'mon's dar."

"Much you know 'bout di'monds."

Bob thrust the jewels back in the case and closed it sharply. He then put it back in the box, and began to fling in the gold by the handful.

"Tain't wuth while wastin' riches on a chap like you, as don't know a di'mond from a piece o' chalk or a slate-pencil. This is the box o' treasure them old chaps was runnin' away with in the Revolution. Guess they got nipped and left the box fur us."

He continued until he had replaced the contents of the box, and closed the lid.

"Let's talk about t'other biz now. Guess you know more 'bout that than you do 'bout di'monds."

What the hour was the boys did not know. Day and night were alike in that place. But Coal made his way back to the chimney and reported that it was growing dark outside. In an hour or two more it would be time for them to put their enterprise into effect.

"See here, old chap, I'm sleepy. Goin' to take a snooze. Jist you keep yer eyes open and wake me up when the clock strikes nine."

"What'm dis nig gwine ter do? Guess I'm a bit snoozy too."

"Guv you ten minutes arter I've had my rations. If you don't keep them eyes open I'll bust yer b'iler when I come to. Them's the orders. And I'm goin' to make a pillar out o' that box, so's you can't steal no di'monds while I'm dreamin' o' gold-mines."

"Dat's wery nice, Bobby Buttermilk," muttered Coal, discontentedly. "But it am bery one-sided."

"Allers that way 'board ship. I'm the cap'n and you're the crew o' this cruiser. I'll court-martial you if I hear of yer sleepin' on watch."

Five minutes afterward Bob was fast asleep. Coal looked down on him as if he wanted bad to kick him. Then he concluded he wouldn't. He took a seat in a corner determined to keep wide awake.

"Won't do fur eberybody to shet dere eyes. Guess I'll keep—yaw!—keep 'wake. 'Kase why—yaw!—yaw!—if dat Bob shouldn't wake up—yaw!—I's gittin' ter'ble—quare 'bout—de eyes—an' ef—"

There came a wider yawn than ever. His head fell on his breast. A half-snore came from his nose. He toppled over, and in a minute was as sound asleep as a granite rock.

How many hours passed by neither of the boys knew. Coal's first return to recollection was helped by a kick from Bob that would have done credit to a young mule. He rolled over and rubbed his eyes.

"Who dat knockin' at de door?" came from his sleepy brain.

"If you don't git up in the twinkle of a 'skeeter's eyelid you'll find out. This what you call keepin' watch? Jist got a notion to keel-haul you fur dis'bedience of orders."

"On'y been 'sleep five minutes. Take my naffydavy on dat."

"You lie, you black rat. What's o'clock, then?"

"Ain't heered de State House strike. An' my stem-winder's got her main-spring sprung."

"You'll git yer flyin' jib-boom reefed if you ain't up in a jiffy, now it's me a-talkin'."

This threat brought Coal to his feet. What time it was the boys could not tell, except from the fact that their candles were burnt down, and ready to go out. From this they judged it must be about ten o'clock.

Lighting fresh candles they proceeded to carry out their enterprise. Cautioning each other they stole along the secret passages that led to their respective goals.

It was not many minutes ere Coal had his eye at the lookout opening to Miss Eldon's apartment. There sat the poor girl with a look of half-hope and half-despair. She was beginning to fear that Coal's promise was but a phantom of her overworked brain.

"Ain't asleep, Missy Clare?"

"Oh, Coal, is it you at last?"

She sprang up in wild hope.

"For de massy, don't holler so loud! Jiss wait till I pull down this fire-board. I'll hab you out o' dat in no time."

A push from within, and the fire-board, that had been undisturbed for half a century, fell on the floor with a crash. She ran hastily forward,

"Gwine to git de soot on dem nice clothes," warr'd Coal. "Dar ain't no help for dat. Jiss step right in yere. Coal knows de ropes."

Reassured by the friendly black face, that she so well knew, Clara stepped without hesitation into the dark aperture. In an instant more she found that she was being helped down a grimy vault. She trembled with fear, but the boy did his best to keep up her spirits.

"A little bit more. Now yere's de place. Slide right down yere. All right! Feel bottom. Missy Clare?"

"Yes, yes."

"Den you go right for'ard till you see a light. Coal got to go back to fix up t'ings a bit."

She stepped tremblingly along the dark, narrow passage toward the dim light that shone in the distance.

While this was going on Bob had made his way to the cellar of the other house. With little hesitation he gained the upper floor. All was deathly still, and he sought the room in which he had seen Tom Allen hang the key.

It was dark here, but after fumbling a little about the wall he succeeded in finding the desired key.

Within three minutes more he was at the door of Milton Somers's prison. Looking around him again to make sure that the coast was clear he gave a tap on the door to arrest the attention of the prisoner. Then inserting the key, in a moment the door stood open.

The prisoner, who was standing just within, sprang hastily forward.

"Who are you? Have you brought help? Is all safe?"

"Drop that fog-horn," cried Bob. "Do you want to wake up somebody in the graveyard across the hill? Tain't no place to yell out. Foller me lively."

He locked the door, and then hurried forward, followed by the released captive. Down-stairs they went with quick but cautious steps. A few minutes brought them to the cellar.

Here lighting a match Bob led his eager companion to the rear corner.

"D'ye see that there hole in the wall?"

"Yes."

"Crawl in there, then. When your head comes ag'in' the board back jist push it hard and it'll drop. Hurry now. Ther ain't no time to waste."

Somers looked at the narrow cavity with hesitation. But at a fresh urging from Bob he obeyed orders. In a minute he was past the screening board.

"Now shove straight for'ard to where you see a light. I'll be arter you as soon as I kin put the key back to fool the coons above."

Bob took a step back. But he came to a sudden halt and dropped his match, as a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"You're sorter smart, young man. But you ain't goin' to play all this score by yourself. Reckon I'll take a hand."

At almost the same minute Coal, who was trying to replace the fallen fire-board, felt a tight clutch in his wool.

"Come out o' there, you black-eyed daisy," cried a harsh voice. "There's some body out here I want to interduce you to."

The scouts had got their prisoners free, but they were just now in equally quarters themselves.

CHAPTER XI.

TWO RATS IN ONE HOLE.

THE capture of the two young scouts had left affairs in a decidedly mixed condition. They were dragged, not without certain cuffs and kicks from their captors, to the room which had been used for the prison of Milton Somers, and flung in there together.

Coal had been dragged thither from the other house, as the prison-room of the house in which he was captured was far too convenient to the chimney.

"Hello, Jack!" cried Joe. "Nipped your rat too, did you? Thought we'd catch 'em if we laid low. In with young midnight. They'll not get out again soon. I promise you."

"Except in a deal box. Confound their young hides, they've dug their own graves."

This was not very agreeable information for the prisoners, but Bob was irrepressible.

"What you bet we don't git out?" he inquired, sanely.

"I'll bet a roost pig."

"And I a pack of chestnuts."

"I'll take them bets," answered Bob, confidently. "Now you'd best git. Don't want to hurt my feelin's no longer, lookin' at yer ugly mug."

With a laugh of disdain the captors turned the key on their prisoners, and withdrew.

"Them two's safe enough, spite o' their bragging," declared Joe. "Now how about the other two?"

"I've found out one thing," answered Jack. "There is a secret avenue, and the boys have discovered it. My prisoner has crawled into it. I twigg'd the whole game."

"And I, too. The avenue opens from the chimney in my house. I saw the nigger put the lady in there."

"What's to be done? Can those passages have any opening outside?"

"Tain't possible. If there was it'd been found out fifty times in the last hundred years."

"Then let's nail up the outside end of the avenues, and we've got them safe. They'll be as neat as a pig in a pen till Allen and Slowby get back."

"If I have my way I'll leave them there for good," said the other, with a brutal look. "Dead men tell no tales."

"Nor dead boys neither."

The look that passed between the villains boded ill for the safety of their prisoners. There were murderous thoughts in their hearts as they parted.

Before half an hour more the outer openings of the secret passage were securely boarded up. It was a serious business for the escaped prisoners. It was impossible to get out again by the way they had entered. And the secret door leading from the vaulted chamber had been left closed by the boys. It was not likely to be discovered again. The boys, who alone knew of its existence, were safe under lock and key. The unfortunate fugitives might be left to die in that subterranean region, far beyond the realm of human eyes and the hearing of human ears.

The two keepers, after finishing their deadly task, met again between the two houses.

"It's my notion we'd best keep watch outside here," said Joe. "There might be an outer opening."

"Tain't a bad idea. You take the river-bank. I'll git atop the barn. I can see an owl's wing a quarter of a mile off, in this bright moonlight. If they do git out we'll twig them before they make many tracks."

In a few minutes the brace of keepers had stationed themselves in their chosen lookout places. All sunk into silence around those dens of secrecy and crime. The moon, that rode high in the heaven, poured its clear light over forest, field and stream. But it failed to reveal the dark deeds that lay buried there beyond the reach of mortal sight.

Yet all was not quite so quiet as it seemed. In a room in one of the houses were a pair of uneasy spirits who were not in the habit of taking things for granted. Bob and Coal were not as docile under lock and key as the former prisoners.

They sat looking at one another for some minutes after the retreating footsteps of their jailers had died away in the distance. Coal looked very solemnly, the corners of his mouth dropped, while his eyes seemed to be all white.

But Bob was the same devil-may-care Arab as ever. He broke into a whistle after several minutes of silence.

"I say, Coal, what's your notion on't?"

"I'd like ter be down at Marse Larkins's, on Sansom street, jiss now, suckin' pigs' feet. Wish I hadn't neber cum yere."

"Wake up, old black and tan. Don't sit down in the mouth 'bout nothin'. Don't think I'm goin' to stay here, do ye?"

"Don't t'ink ye're gwine ter git out mighty easy."

"May be you didn't hear me make a bet 'bout that biz'?"

"Reckon I did."

"What was it I bet?"

"A roast pig, an' a peck o' chestnuts."

"Well, jiss see here, Sam Charcoal, when this roon bets he bets to win. Ain't goin' to let them possums rake me out, nary time. I'm goin' to git out o' this."

"How?"

"Tell you arter while. Got ter find out how myself fu'st."

Bob rose from his seat and began a survey of the room which served them as a prison.

It was a square room, of considerable size, and of the fashion of a century before. Oak wainscoting lined the walls to a height of some four feet from the floor. A broad hearth opened on one side of the room, not being closed up as in the room in which Miss Eldon had been imprisoned.

Bob looked eagerly up the chimney, in hopes

that here might be an avenue of escape for Coal. But the flue proved to be narrow. It was clogged up also by fallen bricks, which had dropped from the chimney top, and lodged at some distance above the hearth.

"Don't b'lieve ther's no show there," said Bob, discontentedly. "Won't try it jist yet, anyhow, till we've 'vestigated the rest o' the shanty."

"Bet ye don't go out dis door," remarked Coal, who had now joined in the investigations. "Looks 's if it mought be iron, 'stead o' wood."

"Solid oak," chimed in Bob. "Thick as a nigger's under-lip. And a lock as mought do fur a State prison. Jist don't let's go out that way, Coal."

"I'd butt him frew, if he was on'y reason'ble size," growled Coal, looking as if he would like to try a butt anyhow.

"Don't try it on," warned Bob. "You mought spill a spoonful o' yer brains, and you wouldn't have none left then, which moughtn't be quite comf'able."

He continued his search after this sly side-thrust at his companion.

There was another door in the room. But this proved to open into a closet, one of those deep inclosures which are only found in old-time houses.

There was only one other point to examine. The room had two windows. It was the moonlight that shone through their narrow panes that furnished the light for this examination. But these windows were closed with strong iron bars, that ran across them from top to bottom, too close together for any human being to pass between.

These the prisoners closely examined.

"Can't we bend 'em?" asked Coal. "If we could squeeze two on 'em apart, dis nig mought squeeze frew."

"Nary time," remarked Bob. "Too thick. Tain't in the wood."

"Den I reckon we mought's well guv up, fur dar ain't no oder way out."

"Don't you go yer hide on that, Coal. 'Case if you do you mought git skinned, and it wouldn't be comf'ble sittin' round in yer bones."

Bob continued his search as he spoke. He had evidently made an interesting discovery, to judge by the closeness of his examination.

"See here, Coal," he suddenly exclaimed.

"S'pose you ain't furgot 'bout that bet."

"Wish you'd shut 'yer mouf 'bout dat ole bet."

"All right, old coon. I was goin' to guv yer a bite o' roast-pork and a pocketful o' chestnuts. But if you keep on blowin' that way I'll cut off yer rations. I'm goin' to rake down them pervisions, sure. Now let's take a nap. It's too soon yet to peg out."

"How you gwine out?" asked Coal, incredulously.

"Tell you arter 'while. Got to git through my snooze, fu'st."

He flung himself at full length on the floor, and refused to answer any more questions. Coal, burning with curiosity, studied the window for awhile himself. But he finally gave it up in disgust. He could find no hopeful signs.

He squatted himself on the floor in a corner of the room, with his head on his breast, too anxious to go to sleep, and watching his sleeping comrade enviously out of the corner of his eyes.

An hour or two passed by. Then Coal, too anxious to wait any longer, stirred Bob with his foot. In a moment the latter was wide awake, and had jumped briskly to his feet.

"What's bu'sted?" he queried.

"I'm 'feard o' dem dar rascals," acknowledged Coal. "Dey threatred to kill us, an' dey mought cum back to keep dere promise."

"Not much. They think we're safe enough. Won't be in no hurry."

"But jiss look how low de moon am gittin'. I'm 'feard it's near mornin'."

Bob took a squint out the nearest window.

"Reckon it mought be time to slide," he said.

Coal asked no more questions, but he eyed his companion curiously. He could not imagine what project was in Bob's shrewd brain.

Bob did not take the trouble to tell him. He took out a pocket-knife and quietly opened the large blade. Then, drawing up a chair by the window, he began to cut into the frame at the point of insertion of one of the bars.

"Don't speck ter chop yer way out wid dat dar penknife?"

"Shet yer mouth and open yer eyes, and you'll see," answered Bob.

In fact his scheme soon made itself apparent. The iron bars had been inserted into the window frame many years before, and the century-old

wood had become soft and rotten around the iron.

This was partly hidden by the thick coat of paint, but Bob's quick sight had discovered it. As soon as the knife had cut through the outer layer the blade sunk into the wood as if it had been chopping into cheese.

In a very few minutes a heap of rotten wood chippings lay on the floor below the window.

Bob continued his labor. The wood was sound at some distance back, but was soft and rotten all around the iron.

In ten minutes' time he had cut a hole through the whole thickness of the wood. Here the iron was bent to give it a firm hold, but Bob's sharp knife-blade rendered this precaution useless. That end of the bar soon lost its hold on the wood.

"That's the rottenest on 'em," said Bob. "But if we kin git one out it'll be as good as a dozen."

"Gwine to cut t'oder end loose?"

"Reckon we mought straighten it out if we lay out our muscle."

Taking hold of the bar near its loose end the two boys exerted their strength. The iron was thick and strong, but they had nearly three feet of leverage, and it slowly bent. The loose end came out of the wood, and a few minutes' hard pulling straightened the bar out nearly perpendicular to the window frame.

There was a space between the two remaining bars quite large enough for the passage of a boy's body.

"Brains and muscle tell, when they work together," cried Bob, delightedly.

He lifted the sash, which came up without difficulty.

"Reckon we'd best git, Coal. Them coons mought be takin' a squint, fur fear o' losin' the'r bets. Wouldn't be healthy if they'd drap round jist now."

Coal was not idle while Bob was talking. He remembered that they were in a second-story room, with a good fall to the ground. He remembered also the mode of his recent escape from his prison in the city house. The bed occupied by the late prisoner was in one corner of the room. Taking a sheet from this he proceeded to cut it into strips.

"What's all that about?" queried Bob.

"On'y makin' a rope. Don't want to break my neck. Tain't insured."

"Jolly smart fur you. Got more brains than I said you had awhile ago."

"Don't you buy Coal fur no fool," was the dignified reply. "'Ca'se I ain't one o' dem sort."

A few minutes sufficed to complete the impromptu rope, to tie one end to a bar, and to fling the other end out of the window.

"Wait till I shake the rope," warned Bob, squeezing himself through the opening. "Tain't strong 'nough to bear two."

In a moment more the active fellow had run down the rope, hand over hand, and stood on the ground below.

In a very few minutes he was joined by Coal. The late prisoners stood free in the night air.

"Think I won the the roast pig and them chestnuts?" queried Bob.

"Reckon you did."

"Then let's git. S'pose them lovers is skeered out o' their wits by this time. We'll have to skoot in by the river road, and slip 'em out."

"Guess dat's 'bout de ting."

The boys made their way to the bluff overlooking the river, somewhat incautiously. They did not dream of the guard stationed in that locality, or that a pair of astonished and angry eyes were already upon them.

But they very soon found it out. For suddenly a dark figure rose from the shadow of a bush behind them, as they stood on the brink of the bluff, and a pair of strong hands caught each of them by the collar in a vigorous clutch. At the same moment a warning whistle rung loudly through the air.

The astounded boys squirmed and twisted, but in vain. They were held as by hands of iron.

"Got out, did you, blast your young eyes! Lucky I happened to be round."

Not a word came from the prisoners. They were past speaking just then. The sudden disappointment was terrible.

In a few minutes the second guard came running up. A dozen words from his comrade sufficed to tell him of what had happened. They held the boys too firmly to escape, while they conversed together in low tones.

"What do you say, Jack?"

"It's my idea, exactly."

"Over the cliff, then?"

"Nothing else safe."

In a moment Bob's burly captor, holding him firmly by the collar, caught him lower down by the other hand, and lifted him clear of the ground. Ere he could speak, if he intended to, he was flung clear out into space. Down he went, forty feet sheer. A crash from below seemed to indicate that he had been crushed on the rocks.

"The other, now."

A wild scream of fright came from Coal's lips, as he felt himself lifted by those ruthless hands. In an instant he was sent after his comrade. A second crash told of his fall.

A faint groan came up from below, and then all was still.

CHAPTER XII.

A SCENE IN THE SECRET CHAMBER.

WHILE the adventurous boys were passing through this series of incidents just recorded, the escaped prisoners whom they had left in the underground avenues were having their experience as well.

As we have seen, neither of them knew of the escape of the other. Each, in fact, was ignorant of the captivity of the other. Clara had been told that Milton Somers had been arrested for forgery in Baltimore. He had been told that the lady he loved was about to marry another lover.

It was, therefore, with a surprise that amounted to consternation that they came face to face in the vaulted chamber into which these passages opened. It was lit up by the candles the boys had left burning, and they both entered in at the same moment.

Each started back with an impulse of affright on seeing another person approaching. Then the cry of recognition broke simultaneously from their lips.

"Miss Eldon!"

"Mr. Somers!"

"Is it possible that you are here?"

"I fancied that you were far away."

"Who told you that? I have been here, held prisoner by a gang of scoundrels, from whom I have just escaped."

"How singular! It is my own story over again. I have also just escaped from prison."

"Good Heavens, Miss Eldon! Can it be?"

"Our experience seems to be the same."

Their astonishment was extreme as they stood gazing, half in doubt, in each other's faces. It was indeed an extraordinary meeting in that strange underground chamber.

Clara looked back along the passage by which she had come.

"Where is Coal?" she murmured. "Where is he to whom I owe my escape?"

"I might ask the same question," remarked Milton. "I was set free by the boy whom you had recently in your employment. The one you sent to me with the strange letter. He promised to follow immediately."

"So did Coal. Why do they not come?"

They advanced further into the chamber, and looked each other more closely in the eyes.

"This is a remarkable meeting, Miss Eldon."

"And a remarkable place."

"I must confess my astonishment."

"I am as surprised to see you here as to be here myself."

But we cannot follow their conversation word by word. The place was destitute of seats, and they were constrained to seat themselves on its hard floor while they continued their conversation.

"I have not known what to think," she said. "First I was told that you were arrested in Baltimore. Then I received this letter in your handwriting."

She handed him the letter she had last received, while her eyes were fixed on him with a strange light.

"It is a base forgery!" he cried, indignantly. "I never saw it before. Was it by this letter you were lured here and made prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Then it seems we have been the victims of a pair of villains. And we need not go far to know who they are. I fancy we could both name them."

"I have another letter here, Mr. Somers," she replied, with a strange look at him. "Can you explain this as easily?"

She took from her pocket the anonymous letter which she had received a week or two before.

He read it with a face that blazed with indignation. Her eyes were fixed on his countenance, as if she hoped to gain more from his looks than his words.

He crushed it fiercely in his hand after finishing its reading.

"Was it to this precious epistle I owe the letter you sent me, in which you darkly hinted at something in my previous life that needed explanation?"

"It was ill-advised of me," she replied, hanging her head. "But I knew nothing of your former life. Strange whispers had reached my ears before. What was I to think? I thought too much of my good opinion of you to be willing to rest with a doubt on my mind."

"Thanks for that admission," he cried fervently, seizing her hand.

"But you admitted that there were dark passages which you could not explain," she continued, withdrawing her hand from his grasp.

"I had my reasons for not explaining," he replied, with a dark look in his eyes. "It is not that I am a criminal, but that there is a family secret which my enemies have unearthed, thinking that I would not reveal the truth, and that you would despise me as a criminal. Events have changed since then. I will tell you now."

"No, no," she cried, fervently. "I have no right to your confidence. I have drawn it from you by force. Tell me nothing. Your word is enough."

"It is not enough," he replied, firmly. "I am no criminal, Miss Eldon. Yet there was a forgery. It was committed by a cousin, near and dear to me. Suspicions fell upon me, and I bore it. It lies on me still. That he acted basely I admit. But I would not recede from the position I had taken. The affair was hushed up, yet many believe me guilty of a criminal act still. Let them, if they will. I care not what they believe. But you; I cannot rest under a cloud to you—because—because I love you, love you so much, yes tenfold more than I love my life."

"I—I do not believe their infamous story—I trust firmly in your innocence," she faltered, avoiding an answer to his last words and his ardent looks.

"And may I not hope—may I not trust?" He took her unresisting hand. "Is my love utterly in vain, Clara, dear Clara, if I may dare to call you so?"

Deep blushes came to her lovely face. She tried to speak, but the words hung unspoken on her lips. She could not lift her eyes to his.

"May I not hope, dear Clara?" His face was very close to hers.

"Yes."

The word was spoken as soft and low as a springtide zephyr, yet with a glad impulse he caught her to his heart and pressed his lips to hers.

"My own! My love! They shall never come between us again; the villains who have sought to sow evil between our hearts."

They were wakened from their dream of love by a startling sound, a noise of loud hammering, which came softened by distance to their ears.

They had forgotten their situation in the interest of more immediate affairs. Now they sprung up in affright. Where were the boys who had guided them, and had promised to return? A half hour had passed, yet they were still missing.

Their eyes met with a sense of alarm which no stronger feeling could subdue.

"What can it mean? Are we entrapped? Have the boys deceived us?"

"No. I cannot doubt little Sambo, the playmate of my earliest years."

"Wait. I must see what this means."

He seized one of the candles and ran hastily along the passage by which he had entered. Arrived at its extremity he saw to his surprise and alarm that it was closed up by stout boards. Creeping through the narrow passage he pushed at these with all his strength, but in vain. They were too firmly fixed to yield.

With increased alarm he seized the candle and ran back to the center chamber.

"Where does the passage by which you came lead?" he asked.

"To the chimney."

He hastened along it. A few seconds brought him to the end of the avenue. But the same startling fact met his eyes. The passage was closed by firm boards, which he sought to move in vain.

He went slowly back. Clara's eyes were distended with alarm as she awaited his return.

"What have you learned?" she cried. "Is it as you feared? Are we in danger?"

"I think we can trust in the boys," he replied, with an effort to reassure her.

"But what has happened? Have they closed the passages?"

"Yes."

She dropped to the floor as if she had been shot, overcome with alarm and emotion.

"Clara, dear Clara!" he cried, kneeling beside her and lifting her in his arms, "do not give way to this dread. We are no worse off than before. We were prisoners then. We are but prisoners still."

"They have nailed us up in this terrible place! They may leave us here to die—to starve!" she shudderingly exclaimed.

"No, no. Besides, the boys are free. They will come to our rescue yet."

"I fear not. I fear they have also been captured and imprisoned."

"But why should they seek to murder us? It can avail them nothing. What have they to gain by such a dastardly act?"

"I know not," she helplessly replied. "I only know that we have been the victims of a base plot. That anonymous letter—the forged letters I received signed with your name—they were all parts of a plan to separate us."

"And I fancy that was the reason of my imprisonment, to prevent any explanation."

"I begin to see through it all now," she ejaculated. "That man Allen came to me in my prison, said that he had discovered my place of detention, asked me to fly with him, and give him the legal right to protect me. In my despair, and my distrust of you, I was on the point of yielding, when the warning voice of little Coal, who was concealed in the chimney, aroused my suspicions. The behavior of Allen on hearing this voice satisfied me that he was leagued with the villains. From that moment I was done with him forever."

"It was a vile scheme," pressing her in his encircling arms. "You made a fortunate escape."

"Then they changed their plans," she continued. "I was promised freedom if I would sign a certain paper, which I was told was a promise not to take legal proceedings against them for imprisonment."

"You did not read it then?" he exclaimed. "I also signed a paper, under the same promise, giving up all claim to the estate of John Amos."

"Who was John Amos?"

"I never heard the name before," he replied. "It is an extraordinary business, though I cannot imagine how such a paper can have any value."

"By the way," she said, curiously, "what can be in that singular box?" She pointed to the box which the boys had lately examined.

"We shall soon see."

He drew the box to where they sat and threw back the loose cover. The papers which Bob had replaced first met their eyes. Removing these they were astonished by the wealth of gold coins that lay below.

"What can this mean? To whom can this belong?"

"The papers may show."

He opened and examined them.

"Why, this is very remarkable," he cried, after a minute. "These are deeds and papers referring to the estate of John Amos, the estate I have signed away any claim to. I cannot understand this. I fear I have done a very unwise act, Clara."

"I fear we have both done so."

"And here seems to be a will, leaving the whole estate to Benjamin Brown."

"My grandfather!" she cried. "I begin to see through it now."

"And my grandfather too, on the mother's side! Can it be that we are relatives? Have we had equal rights to this estate which we have signed away for the benefit of our foes?"

"We are the victims of some deep-laid scheme of fraud. Yet we have these papers, so strangely discovered. Who knows but they may be the proofs required to negative the base scheme to defraud us? God is working on our side. We will win yet, with his aid."

They continued to converse on these strange events, sitting there, clasped in each other's embrace, in that desolate and fearful place, in which they seemed left to perish by famine.

The lights burned down, flickered, and went out. A terrible darkness succeeded. Clara shuddered with irrepressible affright. She clung in trembling terror to her companion, to whom she had given her whole soul in that hour of dread.

"Oh!" she cried, "this is too horrible! We are left to perish here of slow starvation. What shall we do? What shall we do?"

"They cannot be so utterly heartless," he replied. "They will release us. Or the boys will come to our rescue. Do not let your courage

fail, dear love. Heaven will not let such villainy triumph."

"I fear the worst. Those human demons! They are utterly without mercy! They have left us here to perish by the most horrible of deaths!"

An hour or two passed slowly by. The feeling of despair grew stronger upon them. But suddenly, in the midst of their dejection, there came to their ears a muffled sound. Whence it came they could not tell, but they sprung to their feet in excited expectation, and waited eagerly for a repetition of the strange sound.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE FOOT OF THE BLUFF.

On the verge of the river bluff stood the two villains, who had just committed an act of murder. They listened intently. No sound came from below. The silence of death reigned.

They looked down the cliff. But all there was in deep darkness. The moon was low in the sky, and its slanting rays only touched the opposite side of the stream.

"They're done for, sure," said Joe.

"Won't never kick again," rejoined Jack, with a brutal laugh.

"It was a mighty good idea."

"That's so."

"Shall we go down the bank and look them up? It won't be safe to leave the bodies lying there."

"There's no hurry about that. We'd better go back and see if there's been any prowling eyes about. If we catch any spies we'll have to quiet them like we quieted the boys."

"And we'd best take a squint into the houses. The woman's all right, but the man may try to bust his way out. Them boards wouldn't stand an ax or a hammer."

They retired from their post, satisfied in their murderous souls with their night's work.

It was fortunate for Bob and Coal that the murderers put off their investigation of the river-bank. The boys were very far from dead. But they lay stunned and helpless, and a search just then would have enabled the murderers to finish their ugly work. Fortunately they left it until it became too late.

Had all turned out as they expected and intended the boys would certainly have been dashed to death. But instead of falling on the jagged rocks below, Bob came crashing down into the dense thicket of bushes that concealed the mouth of the secret passage.

These broke his fall, and though he struck the ground beneath with a loud crash, it only sufficed to knock the breath out of him. He lay there stunned, but not seriously injured.

Coal was more unlucky. He struck where the bushes were not quite so thick. The shock was terrible. His left arm lay broken under him, and several of his ribs were fractured. Had he struck the rock that lay but a foot to the left death would have been sure. As it was, after a single groan of pain, he lay utterly insensible, on the crushed bushes which had broken the worst of his fall.

For an hour they lay there, without sound or motion. Coal was still insensible. Bob's senses had returned to him, but he was in no humor for moving. He felt as if every bone in his body had been dislocated. Aches and pains tormented him from head to foot.

At the end of this time Coal stirred, and a groan of agony came from his lips.

"Hist!" cautioned Bob. "Keep that down. Don't matter whether you're hurt or not. If you fotch them devils here it's all up with us. Ain't hurt much, be you?"

"I'm dead," groaned poor Coal. "I'm clean kilt. De blood's runnin' outer me in bucketfuls."

"Drop that taffy," answered Bob, indignantly. "You're worth ten dead boys yet. Git up now, and don't lay there playin' funeral."

Coal at this sharp command, strove to obey. But he sunk back with a cry of anguish.

"Oh, my arm, my arm!"

Bob rolled over to him, with a growl of ill humor. But his mood changed after he had examined the poor ducky. He knew enough to discover that his arm was badly broken, and that he had received other hurts.

"That's ugly papers, Coal," he said, after shifting him into a more comfortable position. "Hope you ain't going to peg out. We've got ter keep mum, anyhow. If them fellers above there find out we're alive it's all up. They'll settle us in a jiffy. Jist wait. I'll fotch the boat up and put you in. Then we kin let the river float us away like it did last night."

"But what's to cum o' Missy Clare?" asked Coal, in a feeble voice. "She'll be drefful

skeered in dat dark hole. Can't go 'way an' leab her, neber. Don't trubble yerself 'bout Coal. He ain't much 'count 'longside o' that lubly lady."

"Clean furgot all 'bout them," acknowledged Bob. "There's Miss Clara and her lover both. Think you kin stand it awhile while I go fur 'em?"

"Jiss you go. 'Tain't no matter 'bout me. You fotch out Missy Clare."

"I'm tarnally shook up myself. Don't b'lieve I could swim to the boat. I'll fetch Mr. Somers and make him swim for it. Don't you go groanin', old chap."

"Won't make de least bit noise. But jiss wait till I git out o' dis. Den I'm gwine to luff out de yell I'm bottlin' up now."

Bob turned and crept toward the entrance to the secret passage. He was too sore to walk yet, and was forced to drag himself painfully forward. Fortunately he had no bones broken. It was only the shock of the terrible fall that disabled him.

Forcing his way through the bushes he soon found the narrow rock opening. This he entered, and in a few minutes reached the ascending passage.

He found the way very steep and difficult in his disabled condition. Yet the boy was resolute. Foot by foot he moved upward.

Some loose earth which he disturbed rattled down the passage. It was the sound of this which the prisoners had heard when they sprung to their feet with sudden hope.

Other sounds came to their ears, as they continued to listen with fluttering hearts. There was a rumbling noise, which was followed by a scratching and a peculiar creak. What it all meant they could not imagine. But a gush of fresh air seemed to lift the choking air of that close apartment. A noise followed like the creeping of some animal.

Unable to bear suspense longer, Somers called out, while clasping the form that nestled in terror by his side:

"What is that noise? Is there any person there?"

He waited in suspense for a response.

"Ain't right sure whether I'm a whole person, or only a slice of a person," came in Bob's familiar tones. "But I've a notion if you hadn't let them there candles go out you mought see some-thin' 'bout the size of a boy."

"Gracious Heaven, it is he! It is Bob!" exclaimed Clara, with a wild revulsion of feeling. "We are safe! We are safe!"

Her face fell on the shoulder of her lover, and a flood of tears relieved the intensely wrought-up feelings which she had long repressed.

"Ain't quite so sure o' that," muttered Bob. "Kinder squally 'round here yit. What made you let the candle go out?"

"It burned out."

"There's more on 'em there. Where's yer eyes? Wait. Guess I got some matches."

In a moment more the light of a match flashed through the room.

It revealed on one side the two lovers clasped arm in arm, Clara's face wet with the tears she had just shed.

On the other side it showed the homely, but honest face of Bob Buttermilk and his sturdy form, attired in a ragged suit that was much the worse for his recent adventures.

"Jolly, but I like ter see that," he ejaculated. "Coal and me knowed if we only left you here and kept out ourselves you'd come together jist like taters and gravy. Wish the little nig was here now to see it. Jist hold on a minute. Here's a candle. Like ter take another squint at that picture."

But the lovers separated in hasty confusion before he got the candle lit.

"What is this?" cried Somers, who had just discovered the open door. "Did you enter by this door?"

"You bet. And that's the way out, too."

"How have you found it? And where have you been all these hours?"

"Ain't got no time to answer conundrums now. Tell you all arter 'while. Me and Coal's been through a course o' sprouts, now you bet. But we got to git outter this instant, 'fore them blamed rascals come ter finish us. Foller me. But be mighty keerful. It's awful steep."

"Is there a passage out that way?"

"You bet your jolly head on that. Jist wait. Here's somethin' I ain't goin' to leave. Coal and me diskivered this here box, and I reckon it's our plunder."

He placed the candle so that its light shone down the steep passage. Then clasping the heavy box in both arms he carefully began his descent, followed by the hopeful lovers, who

ten minutes before had seen nothing but death before them.

Bob's exercise had brought back his strength. Though still stiff and sore, he had regained much of his old vigor, and easily made his way down with his precious burden.

"Safe! Safe at last!" cried Clara, on finding herself in the free air, and seeing the dark waters of the river before her. "Thank Heaven for that!"

"Don't ye be too sure," answered Bob. "And don't speak 'bove a whisper. There's a lot o' chaps above there as'd as lieve cut our throats as look at us. We got to git away from here double-quick. Here's poor Coal now, all busted to pieces. Reckon he's got all his arms and legs broke, and 'bout sixteen ribs. You good on the swim, Mr. Somers?"

"No."

"Guess I'll have to go fur that boat, then, though I've got most of the swim shook outer me. Keep mum. I'll fotch it."

He lowered himself into the water, and swam out for the boat, which the boys had returned to the place at which they found it the evening before.

While he did so Clara sought poor Coal, who was repressing his groans with heroic determination, though every joint in his body seemed racked with pain.

She had put little faith in Bob's extravagant assertion, and was surprised to find that the boy was indeed very seriously injured.

While she was quieting his nerves by her soft touch and soothing voice Bob returned with the boat, which he had succeeded in reaching.

The greatest difficulty was in getting the injured ducky aboard. Bob held the boat while Somers and Clara carried him. The pain of moving was more than he could bear. Moans were forced from him, despite his resolution.

They had laid their coats on the bottom of the boat to make it as soft as possible, and succeeded in getting him into a somewhat comfortable position.

The others now embarked, Bob taking good care not to forget his box of treasure.

Then the boat was pushed off from the shore, and, steered by an oar, floated down the dark stream. The moon had now set, and darkness covered all their movements. Into the shadows of the night they floated, out of danger into safety.

Yet all this had not passed without some noise. They had subdued their voices as much as possible, yet the work of getting Coal on board had made some inevitable sounds.

These reached the ears of the vigilant guards at the houses. They emerged simultaneously, and met in the middle of the grounds.

"What's all that? Did you hear them noises?" asked Joe.

"Yes. Seemed to come from the river-bank. Wonder if them boys can be alive yet?"

"Guess we'd best see. If they are we've got to settle them."

But when they reached the crest of the bluff all sounds had ceased. They looked over, but everything was hidden in darkness. The stream flowed on like a river of ink.

"We've got to git down the bank."

They had to go some distance above for this. On reaching the river edge it was only with great difficulty they made their way to the ledge of rocks. This they could not get over.

"We'll have to take the boat for it," said Joe.

"Can you haul it in?"

"By the jumping Joseph the boat's gone!" exclaimed Jack. "We've been a sweet pair of fools. Them boys have come to and slid off in the boat. There's the very Old Nick to pay."

"It's going to be squally weather soon."

"We'd best slide too, that's my notion."

The scared villains made their way with difficulty up the steep bank again.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PAPERS IN THE CASE.

A WEEK has passed since the date of our last chapter. The late captives are at home again. The drift down the river on that eventful night brought them to a village, in which poor Coal was left, under the care of a skillful doctor, and with Bob for nurse. Mr. Somers and Clara took a train for the city, where it was necessary they should be as soon as possible.

Early the next day application was made to a magistrate, and writs sued out against the villains and their tools.

An effort was first made to arrest the latter. Officers were sent to the locality of the late outrages, with warrants of arrest against Joseph Prime and John Brace.

But the houses were found empty and desert-

ed. The villains had smelt danger in the air and disappeared.

Meanwhile Somers had gone to a celebrated real-estate lawyer with the papers recovered from the box in the secret chamber. After consultation with him a new plan of action was decided on. The magistrate was directed not to serve the warrants on Allen and Slowby. For certain reasons it was deemed best to let them lie over for the present.

Yet no light alarm dwelt in the residence of this precious pair of reprobates.

At daybreak that morning they had received a visit from the brace of warders whom they had left in charge of their captives, and heard a statement of the events of the previous night.

That they stormed and cursed at this news need not be told. But hard words won't drive away hard facts. There was disaster staring them in the face.

"Why the deuce didn't you pursue them and bring them back?" cried Allen, furiously.

"I reckon maybe we did," answered Joe, sullenly. "Jack took the up river and I took the down. But the night was as black as a nigger's heel, and we mought as well have chased a will-of-the-wisp."

"It's confounded queer," exclaimed Slowby, "all this cock-and-bull story about an underground passage. You don't expect us to swallow that?"

"You can do as you please," retorted Jack. "But when I want to work up a lie it won't be o' that shape."

"There are traditions of such a passage," said Allen. "I never looked for it, for I never believed them. But you have told us only of the escape of the boys. Your prisoners were nailed up in that secret passage. They must be there yet."

"Not much," answered Joe. "We ripped up the boards and took a squint inside. Found a round room in the center, with an open door, and a passage running down to the river. That's the way they slid. And they yanked the boys off, too, for we found where they had tumbled. There was marks of blood on the bushes. I tell you we were sold, the worst way."

"You can bet high on that," chimed in Jack.

"And a pair of precious hands you are to do a job of work," sneered Allen.

"S'pose so," replied Joe, shrugging his shoulders. "But what's done is done."

"And hard words won't butter parsnips," repeated Jack.

That was plain enough. The job was done, and its consequences had to be met. A long consultation ensued. It ended in the two minor villains being paid the price of their crime, and their promise to take flight immediately for the far West, until this affair should blow over.

Allen and Slowby, on their side, concluded to change their quarters. It was best to go into hiding until they saw what action their escaped victims designed to take.

A week passed, as we have said, during which they continued in concealment. They were not idle, however, since they soon discovered that no active measures were being taken against them. Encouraged by this, Allen ventured out of his hiding-place, and placed the papers signed by Clara and Somers in the hands of a lawyer.

The latter read them carefully.

"I see," he said. "These documents sign away all claim to inheritance in the estate of John Amos, in favor of the heirs of the other branch, inheriting under the will of Richard Amos, father of John. Who is John Amos? Who are the signers of these papers? What is the case?"

"I will tell you."

Allen seated himself, and rehearsed the history of the case, from the times of the Revolution downward.

The lawyer listened with deep interest. He saw his way to a big fee.

"And John Amos left no will?"

"He was killed and his house plundered, as I have told you. After the war no trace of the papers relating to his property could be found. They have never been found to this day."

"Then you have a sure thing," said the lawyer, confidently. "John Amos leaving no will, the will of Richard Amos becomes effective, and these renunciations of the other heirs make you sole heir. I presume you can prove your statements?"

"Every word of them."

"Then I will take the case. Let me congratulate you, Mr. Allen. You have a sure thing of it."

"I know that," answered Allen, with a smile of triumph.

The lawyer let no grass grow under his feet. The case was placed on record the very next day, and the preliminary steps taken.

Meanwhile the two rescued lovers remained quiet, under the advice of their attorney. They were waiting for the enemy to show his hand.

In the village on the Schuylkill remained the two boys, Bob continuing to faithfully nurse his black-complexioned friend, who was a very sick youth.

The broken bones had been set, but the delay and excitement had caused much inflammation, and Coal was now in a high fever, and raving with delirium.

He had not been neglected by Miss Eldon and Mr. Somers, who visited him every second day, and ordered that everything possible should be done for his comfort and recovery.

"That's jist my notion, Miss Clara," declared Bob, "fur Coal ain't no common darky. He's a reg'lar black di'mond. Some o' the boys is been pokin' fun at me fur 'sociating with him, but 'tain't much I keer fur them chaps."

"Don't mind their gibes," answered Clara, with a smile of encouragement. "You are acting nobly, my boy, and you can afford to disdain them."

"That's just what I did, Miss Clara," said Bob earnestly. "I giv one fellar a swipe 'cross the jaws as landed him in the gutter, and I dropped another in a pig-pen. 'Tain't much I keer fur them."

"Oh! but, Bob, I don't mean that," cried Clara, with an involuntary laugh. "That is all wrong. You must not fight."

"Ther' weren't no fight about it. I had 'em both licked 'fore the fight begun."

"But that's not noble, my lad. You should return good for evil."

"Reckon I giv 'em a good settlin'," answered Bob, sturdily. "Guess they'll keep clear o' this chicken next time they've got eggs to sell."

Clara turned away with a concealed smile. Bob was not up to her idea of morals. He would need to be put through a new course of training.

"Ther's one thing I wanted to ax you about, Miss Clara," he continued. "It's that box o' gold and di'monds. What's goin' to be done 'bout them?"

"You and Coal were the first discoverers. They ought to belong to you," she answered. "But we must wait awhile. The law will have to settle all these matters."

"Dunno what the law's got to do with it," growled Bob. "First come, first find; that's my law. If you want 'em you kin have 'em. But if you don't want 'em I'm goin' to hang on like grim death. Ain't goin' to giv 'em to no lawyers."

"I think you have fairly earned them," she replied. "If I have any say in the matter they are yours."

The days passed on, bringing matters step by step forward. Allen's suit at law, against the estate held by Clara Eldon, was progressing, yet the opposite side had put in no plea in rebuttal.

The confidence of the villains grew as the weeks passed by, and their adversaries failed to show their hand. They were puzzled, however, and not quite at their ease. It seemed unnatural that no proceedings should have been taken against them for false imprisonment, and that the two lovers should seem to be taking life so quietly while their affairs were in such a dangerous condition.

"I fear there is some thunderbolt hanging over our heads," said Slowby, uneasily. "Such behavior is not natural. They're working up some game against us."

"I'd like to know what," answered Allen. "We've got the whole game in our hands. They've let their chance go by to try an arrest on us. If they try it on now we can swear it is only revenge."

"But it isn't natural to let such a property go without a fight."

"Don't you see the confounded idiots are over head and ears in love? That's what ails them, Harry. The world's all rose-colored to them now. They haven't time to think about such trifles as bread and butter. They'll waken up one of these days, all of a sudden to find themselves minus love and money both."

"By Jove, I shouldn't wonder if you were right, Tom. Love-sick fools take leave of their brains, I know that. They say she's perfectly daft about him."

"And he about her."

"And you were green enough to think she would cotton to you."

"She didn't know her own mind then. She's found it out since."

During these weeks the sick boy was rapidly mending. His fever had passed away, the inflammation had subsided, and the broken bones were rapidly knitting. His healthy young blood was telling in the race.

In a month's time Bob had him on the street, guiding his feeble steps in a search for fresh air.

The street boys of the village looked on at a distance. They had had a taste of Bob's way of returning good for evil, and concluded not to interfere.

In a week or two more Coal was brought to the city. Here he was taken to Miss Eldon's house, Bob continuing to take care of him.

"Mind you, you've got to carry yerself level, Sam Charcoal," remarked the rough nurse. "You can't play sick no longer with this coon. I'll rattle you down if you try on any capers."

"Want ter take 'vantage of a little sick nigger, I speck," said Coal, showing his teeth. "Jess giv me a week or two more, an' we'll see who's boss o' dis shanty."

Meanwhile the proceedings in court were progressing. The claim of Thomas Allen, under the will of Richard Amos, to the estate now held by Clara Eldon, seemed incontrovertible. The signed and witnessed renunciation of all claim by the only other heirs, and the lack of any counter-suit, rendered the affair an easy one, and the case was called up in the September term of the court for final judgment.

The claimant sat beside his lawyer, with a smile of triumph on his face. He felt sure of the success of his base scheme, and turned with a look of assurance on his face to his confederate, as the judge took up the papers and prepared to speak.

"One moment, your Honor," said a noted lawyer, who till now had sat quiet. "Before this claim is decided I have some papers to put in evidence which have an important bearing on the case."

He rose and handed a bundle of papers to the judge. The latter opened and looked at them, surprise marking his face.

"What have we here?" he demanded, excitedly. "The deeds relating to the estate of John Amos? The will which it was declared was lost in the Revolution?"

"But which has happily been recovered, your honor."

"Well, this decidedly alters the aspect of the case."

"It is false! Those papers are forgeries! It is a base scheme to defraud me of my right!" screamed Allen, rising to his feet in high excitement.

"I fancy not," replied the lawyer, coolly. "And that reminds me. I have got a warrant of arrest against you and Harry Slowby, for abduction and imprisonment of Miss Clara Eldon and Mr. Milton Somers. Officer, do your duty."

It was a sudden and utter annihilation of the expected success of the villains. At the very moment when they expected to snatch the wealth of her ancestors from their unresisting victim, they found themselves utterly defeated, and dragged away to prison on a criminal charge.

The papers found in the box in the secret chamber had done their work.

The villains were taken from the court to the prison-van, and the judge, after examining the papers and hearing the plea of the counsel of the defendant, reversed his intended decision on the spot, and fully confirmed Clara Eldon in her ownership of the debated property.

And here we might end, as here ends the series of events with which we have so far been concerned. But a glance forward must be taken at the future life of our characters.

Villainy and honesty both got their reward. The conspirators were put on trial and convicted, receiving a sentence each of five years' imprisonment in the State penitentiary. As for their tools they had disappeared, and ventured not to show their villainous faces again in Philadelphia.

About the same time a marriage in high life took place, Milton Somers leading Clara Eldon to the altar. Among the guests at this wedding were two of our special friends, Bob Buttermilk and Sam Charcoal, but both dressed so tastily and looking so fresh and well that their best friends would hardly have recognized them.

Since then they have become the special *protégés* of Mr. and Mrs. Somers. They have both been sent away to school, and are getting polished into more gentlemanly and educated ways.

But, however many high-toned friends he may make, Bob will never forget nor disdain his ebony colored pard, and vows that if he lives to a thousand years old he will never turn his back on his old crony, Sam Charcoal.

THE END.

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